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Dandy Rock's Pledge; or, Hunted to Death.

BY GEORGE WALDO BROWNE,

AUTHOR OF "THE DREAD RIDER," "THE TIGER OF TAOS," "DANDY ROCK," "THE MAD MINER," "THE GOLDEN HAND," ETC.



"WILL CLINGING TO HIS RIFLE, HE FOUND HE WAS AT LEAST HOLDING HIS OWN WITH THEM. BY THE AID OF THE INCREASING DARKNESS HE HOPED TO EVADE THEM."

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CHAPTER I.

DANDY ROCK'S PLEDGE.

"STRANGER, as true as I tramp from Old Texas, I'll hunt that coyote to his den and save your child, or dig the end o' my own trail. Rock Randel swears it, and hyar's my hand."

In a valley of the Sierras the speaker was the central figure of an impressive scene.

Upon either hand the towering mountain-sides shut out the light of the fast setting sun, so that the gloom of twilight hung about the place.

He was a tall, commanding-looking person, with long, raven hair and heavy mustache, a clear, piercing eye, and a form capable of great endurance. Having spent his earlier years on the plains of the Lone Star State, though he was equally "at home" amid the wilds of California as on the savannas of his native land, he had carried with him to the mountains the *sebriquet* of Dandy Rock, The-Man-from-Texas.

At the moment we introduce him to the reader, he was standing with his left hand resting upon the muzzle of his long rifle; he held the weapon upright; in his right hand he clutched a heavy revolver, while he gazed upon the motionless form of a man lying at his feet as he spoke.

The prostrate person turned slightly, with a moan of pain, to give utterance to some request, though in so low a tone that the other could not understand it.

Dropping upon his knees, Rock cried:

"Is there anything more, old beaver? Speak quick of that am, fer I reckon ye ar' bout done fer. Don't be afeerd to say it. Rock Randel has given you the pledge of his life, and may the hungry coyotes pick his bones if he ever goes back on a friend! Wagh!"

"May God bless you!" said the other, with great difficulty, as he pressed his hands upon his side where a great pool of blood was already forming upon the earth, telling that he had received a fearful wound in some encounter. "Once more, let me hear your promise to save my child."

"I swear it, old coon, or may the varmints dig my funeral!"

"Tell my child how I died, and you will not go unrewarded. I can die easier now that I know that there is some one to carry out the work I have begun. But it is dreadful to realize—"

Here the speaker choked and broke completely down.

Rock raised his head tenderly, feeling that the other's race was nearly run.

"Anything more to ask, old pard?" queried the Texan, as his companion breathed easier after a moment.

"Give my body proper burial, and—and remember your pledge—save my child!"

Sinking back with a groan, the gaze of the wounded man became fixed upon the blue sky above, and his lips ceased to move.

"Robbed out!" muttered Rock, as he laid his friend's head back upon the ground. "But, it's a long trail as has no end, and that coyote shall pay dearly for—"

The sound of footsteps arrested his attention, and springing to his feet, he half raised his rifle as he looked around.

In an instant he saw a dozen roughly-dressed men approaching, all armed to the teeth.

"Hal hal!" laughed the foremost, as he beheld Randel's defiant attitude, "put down that shooter. We mean you no harm."

"What do you want?" asked The-Man-from-Texas, doggedly, fixing his gaze upon the leader without lowering his weapon.

"We have come for the body of the dead man by your side."

"What is he to you?"

"Enough that it is not for you to interfere in our purpose. Will you let us remove it peacefully?"

"Not till I know you better. I have promised to see that he is properly buried."

"Bah! you are a fool! We will save you that trouble. So stand aside."

He was only one against twelve, but he faced them coolly, as he said:

"Hold on till you prove your claim. What was this man's name?"

"Roland Maxcy."

"Sho!"

"And he was my brother," the speaker continued.

"Jeems Stoppie! who'd a' thought it! Look 'bout as much alike as a white hoss and a kickin' mule!"

"That makes nary difference. We have come for his body, and if you give us any of your tomfoolery we'll take you, too."

"Jes' so! Reckon I don't savor of your company. If you want to help me bury the body I shan't object; but I promised to see that 'twas done to order, and Rock Randel ain't going to sneak out o' his talk."

"Then you are Rock Randel?" exclaimed the other, in surprise. "Thank you, for telling us of it. You can go with us and see that the carcass is earthed to order. Come, men, fetch it along. We have fooled away time enough."

The speaker's followers started forward to obey his command, when Rock exclaimed:

"I have not the time to go with you. Why not dig his funeral hyar?"

"Cos it's 'gainst our orders. Sides, we hev got nothin' to work with."

"I don't know ye," declared The-Man-from-Texas, as he still looked the leader straight in the eye. "Go 'bout your bizness, and I promise—"

"Enough has been said," broke in the other. "We'll have the carcass ef we have to kill you in doing it. But, you can go with us if you wish."

Without further opposition, Rock allowed the party to take up the body and start to bear it away, while he followed them in silence.

"I may git corralled like a smoked eel!" he muttered to himself, "but I'm 'tarnal anxious to know what 'em varmints are drivin' at, so I'll jes keep with 'em a spell."

With apparent carelessness, though really never more on his guard in his life, the Texan accompanied the gang down the valley for perhaps half a mile, when the leader ordered a pause.

"It's no use to go any further," he said. "The Cap promised to meet us here; and while he is coming, boys, you had better dig the grave. Get the tools, Robie."

To the surprise of Randel, one of the number brought from a clump of bushes near at hand a spade and pick, both of which bore the appearance of recent use.

Selecting a spot near the center of the opening the men soon began to throw up the loose earth, so that in a few minutes quite a pit was excavated, Rock all the while watching the workmen in silence.

"A little deeper, boys; and if the chief don't come by that time we will chuck the carrion in and cover it up."

Ten minutes later the task was done.

"Lend a hand, Sir Texan, and help bury the carcass."

Rock helped bear the form to the brink of the grave, and as they laid it down upon the earth for a moment, preparatory to lowering it into the pit, he cried:

"He is not dead! See! he moves!"

The corpse indeed did show signs of life.

The lookers-on started in amazement, but their leader quickly said:

"It don't matter. I'll warrant he won't kick long with two feet of earth above him. Let him down, boys, as quick as possible."

Rock Randel sprung to his feet like a tiger at bay, and seizing his rifle faced them, crying:

"Look hyar! would you bury that man alive?"

"Stand back, and let us do our work!"

"Never! I reckon this coon will fill that funeral afore ye shall bury his pard alive!"

There was an unmistakable ring to the Texan's voice which told that he was fearfully in earnest, while his nervous hold upon his rifle warned his foes of deadly peril.

"Very well," replied the leader of the party, as he boldly defied The-Man-from-Texas, "the grave is big enough to hold two!"

CHAPTER II.

BURIED ALIVE.

For a moment the amazed horde stared upon The-Man-from-Texas in silence, while he faced them calmly.

The wounded man continued to show signs of returning consciousness.

How this strange tableau would have ended it would be hard to tell had not a new arrival suddenly appeared upon the scene.

Advancing with a quick, nervous step, a medium-sized man dressed in a plain suit of black, and his face hidden by a dark mask, paused before the wondering crowd.

"Ho, Curlew!" he cried, in a sharp voice to the leader. "What means this?"

"Nothing," was the sullen reply; "only that dog of a Texan is trying to poke his nose into our funeral. He says we shan't bury this carion."

The first speaker had, ere this, fixed his eyes, that glowed from 'neath their partial concealment like balls of fire, upon Rock, to meet the other's gaze unflinchingly.

"Who are you, sir, to meddle in our affairs?" he asked, with an attempt at arrogance.

"This coon hyar," replied Randel, pointing to the form of the prostrate man, "was my pard, and these chaps were going to bury him alive, when I tell 'em to go ahead of they want a double funeral. See, he moves!"

"The Rocky Mountains move!" exclaimed the new-comer, with a laugh, as he looked at the body. "Pshaw, men, throw it into the hole and cover it up as quick as possible."

The words had barely left his lips, when the sharp click of Rock Randel's rifle-lock was heard, and the others fell back inactive.

"The first man who touches him dies!" gritted The-Man-from-Texas, fiercely.

By this time night had fairly settled upon the scene, but it was still light enough for the foes to see each other distinctly.

The masked man trembled with rage.

"Put down your weapon," he said after a moment, "and we will see if your friend lives."

"Tis all I ask," replied Rock, and for an instant he relaxed his vigilance, for once thrown off his guard.

Quick as thought the other, who had been watching for this chance, gave his command, when his followers, to a man, hurled themselves upon the brave Texan.

Not till the *spang* of Rock's rifle, however, had rung out, and one of the horde fell to the earth.

Then, as they closed upon him, he clubbed the weapon, to sweep down another before they could seize him.

A sharp struggle followed; but, assailed by such overpowering numbers The-Man-from-Texas was soon borne to the ground, when despite his almost superhuman resistance he was a prisoner.

"Bind him, boys, so that he can't escape, and we will look after him as soon as we bury these bodies. He is a prize we little dreamed of."

In less time than it takes us to relate it, Rock was secured, hands and feet.

As this was done the masked leader turned to the wounded and dead, and without hesitation cast the bodies of those Rock had slain into the pit, and with a kick of his foot sent the living form of the Texan's friend into the grave with them.

How the honest heart of The-Man-from-Texas throbbed as he saw his companion about to be buried alive! True his wounds had seemed fatal, but the inhumanity of the horde caused him to wrestle with his bonds in frantic energy.

As the ruffians began to cover the bodies with the loose earth that had been thrown out, a fierce growl suddenly startled them from their task; and before they could hardly gain breath, a heavy body came tearing through the undergrowth.

"Injuns!" shouted one, and they seized their firearms to meet the unexpected attack, not knowing whether to flee or stand their ground.

It was not Indians, but proved to be a huge cinnamon bear that had been aroused from its lair near at hand by the scent of blood.

Before the terrified men had time to see more the furious brute was in their midst.

In too close proximity to discharge their rifles, they tried to beat back the monster by clubbing their weapons, but the bear scattered them like chaff before a strong wind.

The masked man alone retained anything like self-possession. Quickly bringing his rifle to his shoulder he was in the act of pulling the trigger, when the brute seized the muzzle in its mouth, to receive the fatal shot and staggered one side, stricken with death.

It was some time, however, before it finally ceased its struggles.

A knife-wound inflicted by one of the men, as the animal tossed to and fro, served to hasten its end.

The attack of the bear seemed providential to Rock, for, as his captors all joined in the fight leaving him momentarily alone, he began to try and gain his freedom. In the brief inter-

val he so far succeeded that he found his hands at liberty.

The fight was over though, and his spirits fell as he felt that he had labored in vain, for his efforts would now be discovered and frustrated. But to his joy, while a part began to finish filling the grave, the rest prepared to dress the bear.

Just as the last of the dirt was shoveled upon the grave, he freed his feet.

He had no time to spare, and seeing his rifle lying a short distance off, his first move was to spring to the spot, and catching up his trusty weapon, he swung it about his head with a triumphant whoop; and with another yell of defiance he bounded away down the valley.

Taken completely by surprise he disappeared from view behind a tree before his captors recovered enough to start in pursuit.

"Quick, men!" yelled the masked leader. "A hundred dollars to the one who will capture him dead or alive."

The eleven men rushed madly forward through the growth, and soon clearing the copice in front came into full sight of the fleeing Texan.

Then their firearms spoke, and for an instant the blinding discharge filled the air.

CHAPTER III.

A SLEEPING STRANGER.

As the smoke from their rifles cleared away the pursuers saw Rock still running for dear life and apparently unhurt.

"He will escape," cried the masked leader. "Forward, men, for your lives."

Fleet of foot almost as the deer The-Man-from-Texas bounded down the valley, glancing back ever and anon to note the progress of his foes.

As yet he had formed no definite course, but was scanning the country right and left for a way of eluding the horde behind him as he rushed onward.

Still clinging to his rifle, he found he was at least holding his own with them. By the aid of the increasing darkness he hoped to evade them.

Thus, occasionally making the woods resound with his wild cries of defiance, the intrepid Texan gave his enemies a life and death race.

As he kept on the land grew more broken, though here and there a stunted tree spread out its scraggy branches.

Again disappearing from his pursuers, as he dodged around the huge rocks, or darted behind the low-limbed growth, he became silent, and then looked for a place of concealment.

"I don't savor of puffin' it like a scart redskin," he muttered. "Reckon I must kiver."

In the midst of his speculation he suddenly found himself upon the edge of an opening in the growth, and extending for a couple of rods was a white ledge, its smooth surface shining like glass. Beyond that he could gaze into a ravine that yawned full fifty feet below, like an enormous pit sunk in the ground with nearly perpendicular sides.

Rock's breath came quick and short, as he saw his fix. To descend the declivity seemed like certain death, and to turn aside was capitivity, or to be shot by his foes.

No time was to be lost in hesitation. A shout from his enemies told him that they were still close upon his heels.

With an answering cry of defiance the daring Texan ran down the slippery surface of the ledge, until he stood upon the brink of the chasm, barely saving himself from falling down the steep declivity by dropping upon his hands and knees.

He saw at a single glance the impossibility of going further, and he momentarily felt that his race was run.

About to regain his course to a place where he could meet his foes in a stand-up fight he saw to his right, and lower down on the bank, what looked to him like an opening in the cliff large enough for him to hide in.

Without delay he crawled toward the spot, and by dint of hard work let himself down upon a narrow projection or shelf in the rock, that was within reach of the crevice.

To his joy he saw that the place promised him ample concealment, and holding upon the jagged surface with all his strength he succeeded, after repeated attempts and some severe gashes upon his hands, to gain its cover, just as he heard his pursuers above him.

Crawling in out of sight, he lay at full length upon the rocky surface, with scarcely room to move, and listened to the gang of men above.

"He has fell off into the bottom," Rock heard one declare.

"It must be so, for he can't have gone around

this," said the sharp voice of the masked leader.

After this a short consultation was held, every word of which was heard by The-Man-from-Texas, and then by the sounds he knew that they were moving away.

"It has saved us considerable trouble, and we will go back to our retreat," were the last words borne to his ears.

Waiting until he was satisfied that he had nothing to fear from his foes, Rock cautiously left his hiding-place.

When at last he reached the top of the cliff, and stood again upon the glassy surface of the ledge, he peered around to see if there was any indication of his enemies lingering near.

"Nary a sign," he muttered, "but that war a clus rub. Howsumever, old Rock is good for more work. I declar' to blazes, old black-face, we'll meet ag'in, and I reckon 't'll be your turn to heel it then. I sha'n't forget 'em stars of yours or that voice."

While speaking thus to himself, The-Man-from-Texas hastened toward the growth and reaching it followed along its edge, steering for the base of the mountain range to the west.

It was clear starlight, but there was no moon to lighten the scenes of night.

He paused once, as he fancied he heard his foes further down the valley; but after listening a few minutes without cause for alarm he concluded that he must have been mistaken, and moved on again.

"I wonder whar their den am?" he mused. "I reckon they must hev astopping-place somewhar in this kentry, though I have never heerd of sich a gang. They didn't look like miners. Howsumever, I mustn't bother with 'em, for I must look arter the coyote as wiped out that stranger. Yes; I'll keep my pledge to him; and then I'll strike the trail o' these varmints. Wagh! I see fun ahead."

While thinking thus the Texan was still hurrying forward, and had soon passed over half a mile.

As he was thus cautiously advancing, he suddenly discovered the form of a man leaning against a tree just ahead of him.

"Jeems Stoppel of that ain't queer, may I be blowed like a north wind! 'Pears so he is snoozing!"

Approaching as silently as possible, he went within a few rods and paused again, to watch him closely.

He was a youth of not more than twenty, with a smooth, fair face and slender form, though its symmetry showed that he possessed strength beyond the average of his age.

His left hand was resting lightly upon the barrel of a highly-polished rifle, while the other steadied him in his position by holding upon a branch of the tree just over his head.

"Thar may be other chaps 'round!" said Rock, mentally, "but I am going to risk and spoke at the boy."

Suiting the action to the thought, The-Man-from-Texas gave a low whistle that instantly caused the young stranger to start and look wildly around, while he grasped his firearm more firmly.

"Hyar I am, old beaver," exclaimed Rock, lowly, at the same time raising his rifle halfway to his shoulder; "but ye needn't call your pards, 'cause it might make a little hard feeling."

"I am alone," replied the other, quickly, "so you have nothing to fear as I am peacefully disposed," and he gazed upon the Texan with the utmost unconcern.

"Who are ye, all alone in these heathenish diggin's?"

"My name is Alfred Howe, and I have come from Cross-tree Corner. I was on my way to Ridley's Bluff, and in trying to save a little distance in going across the lower range I got lost and have traveled I know not where, until I am nearly tired out."

"Jess like these younkers! But ye appear honest, and ef ye'll promise to never snooze on your post ag'in, I reckon we'll be larfin' coons on the same trail. My get-up is Rock Randel, and I hail from old Texas. Gin us your paw, Alf."

CHAPTER IV.

"WE'RE ON THE SAME TRAIL."

"Are you Rock Randel?" asked the young man in surprise, as he grasped the honest Texan's hand.

"Every pop, old chap, es true es ye'll see stars a runnin' down hill backward. Reckon ye hev read 'bout me? I know'd a chap onc'e wanted to write up my doin's, an' I told him to hold up till I had tramped my last trail, but

he may hev gone back on my idee, an' ye hev seen the book."

"I have heard of you many times; and I have wanted to find you above all other men."

"Sho! Jeems Stoppel! Do I look nateral?"

"About as I expected," replied Howe with a light laugh. "Only they said you were cross-eyed!"

"Cross-eyed? me cross-eyed?" asked Rock in amazement. "Where am the chap as said so? Jess show him to me—quick! I'll show him what 'tis to be cross-eyed and cross-eared and cross-nosed, too!"

"Are you alone in this uncivilized country?"

"Yes. But that puts me in mind of my business. Hev you seen a lot of coyotes pass this way?"

"No," was the surprised answer.

"Thet is 'cause ye hev been snoozing. Eleven o' 'em hev gone by."

"Whar can the animals have gone? But they are not very dangerous I believe!"

"Animules! Are you asleep now? I mean a pack o' varmints—men! I hed a regular skrimmige with 'em and rubbed out two!"

"That accounts for the firing that I heard."

"Jesso. But kem, let's toe and heel, and while we trot along we ken keep time with our tongues."

Rock then led the way down the valley, closely followed by his new-found companion.

"Ye said ye war looking for me; what do you want?" asked The-Man-from-Texas.

"I have got into trouble, and I must have some one to help me out."

"Rock Randel is jess the beaver for you if you run an honest hand."

"I will tell you my story, and then you can judge for yourself."

"All right. Spot the trail. And while you talk, I'll keep my peepers spread, for 'em coyotes may be hidin' round for us."

"To begin my story then, I have been in the employ of one Lemuel Divons, the foremost man of business in Cross-tree City. He has ever treated me well and I have tried to discharge my du' y faithfully.

"A sout one month ago he sent me to Springvale with a considerable sum of money to pay up a share he had purchased in the mine there."

"I started on my trip in company with one other. But while making our way on horseback we were attacked by a band of masked men; my companion was killed, and I was robbed of every dollar I had, and left by the road-agents for dead as I suppose, for when I came to my senses I was alone, so confused that I could hardly tell what had happened."

"In the struggle, however, I had managed to tear the mask from the face of one of the gang, and I shall never forget how he looked."

"As soon as I could I returned to Cross-tree and told Divons what had occurred. He raved and swore that it was a scheme gotten up by me to rob him of his money. Of course I denied it, which only served to make him fiercer. Finally he declared that unless I gave up the money, within ten hours he would have me arrested for robbery. In vain I expostulated with him, and told of how frequent occurrences these robberies had become, and that I was innocent.

"Promptly, at the end of the time, he sent for the vigilance officers, and, unable to escape had I so desired, I was arrested and thrown into the jail. The very next day my trial came off, and I was not only tried but condemned as an outlaw and a road-agent. I had a narrow escape from being lynched on the spot, but aided by a few friends, for all did not desert me, my execution was delayed until the next day, and I was again placed in confinement with a double guard over me to see that I did not get away."

"Perhaps I should have said ere this that my employer and persecutor, Lemuel Divons, had a daughter whom I had learned to love most dearly. To the sweet Lilla Divons, who had given me the full affection of her generous heart, my condemnation was a fearful blow. And I suffered more on her account than my own. Her father had not looked upon our union with favor, and I think he was glad that it was likely to be broken off, no matter what the cost to his child."

"To cut my story short, that night, Lilla bough off one of the guards who was sweet on her, and though nobly risking her own life, effected my freedom.

"Of course I was forced to flee, and ever since I have been hunted like a beast of prey. A price is set upon my head, and if I dared to show myself I should be shot down like a dog."

"I have seen my beautiful preserver

Dandy Rock's Pledge.

once, and then for only a moment's talk. She gave me a false beard and wig to wear, so that I should not be recognized so quickly if any one should see me. I removed the whiskers at dark, as the cord which holds them on burt my face, so that you found me without them. But I will replace them now," and as he spoke he slipped the false beard upon its place, which made him appear at least ten years older than before.

"Jeems Stopple! it don't take much to make an old man o' you!"

"It does change my looks some. But to resume my story: for the past three weeks I have done nothing but hunt for the men that robbed me. Until I find them, and bring them to justice, thus showing my innocence of crime, I am an outlaw before the world, and cannot gain the hand of her whom I love better than my own life, though she believes I am not guilty. I have heard of you, Mr. Randel, and have wished to find you, hoping that you would assist me in my need. You are an old woodman and just the one to ferret out these robbers, while I know nothing of wildwood life. Rock Randel, you have my story, and now will you help me?"

The speaker had turned his dark eyes upon the Texan with an imploring light, and he clasped the ranger's hand in a firm grasp.

"You said you had seen the face of one of 'em road-agents: what did he look like?" asked Randel without replying to the other's question.

"He was rather good-looking; though his skin was a little sallow, and he seemed about forty years old. His eyes were dark and he wore a full brown beard. What struck me as little singular, and a mark I shall never forget, his mustache where it parted under the nostrils was completely white, though I saw no other gray hair."

Stopping abruptly, Rock faced his companion, smiling with more than common excitement:

"Did he have a red spot under his right eye?"

"Yes; a birth-mark upon his cheek."

"Randel Rock! he's my man! Yes, Alf Howe, I chip in with you. We are on 'the same scail!"

CHAPTER V.

ROCK'S SECRET.

"I don't understand you," declared young Howe, as he grasped the extended palm of The-Man-from-Texas.

"That is because you have not heard my secret. I have a stranger story to tell than you have spun; but, as I live, we are out on the stage-road from Cross-tree to Ridley's Bluff. The 'Wayside Home' is only a leetle furder up hyar, and I reckon we'd better stop thar to-night; I ain't had grub since sunrise, and I feel mighty gaunt. Mebbe you're in the same predicomy?"

"I have scarcely tasted food since yesterday."

"Sho! Wal, I reckon Granny Sloan 'll hev a bone for us to pick. So kem arter me, and I'll tell ye my plans afore we sleep. I don't want any pesky ears 'round when I'm talking, nor I hev got sum ticklish doin's ahead."

Relapsing into silence, the two hurried forward a quarter of a mile or so, when they came in sight of a light, and a moment later reached a large, rambling log building with others of smaller dimensions closely connected.

"'Tis the Wayside Home, kept by Granny Sloan," said Rock. "I remember of stopping hyar a year ago, and I found good picking. Guess they won't know me, though, now, 'cause I was on a leetle particlker bizness then, and was rigged up like a whoopin' red-skin. Jeemus, how things will change, and we trot arter them!"

By this time they had gained the entrance of the only door visible to the rude structure, and as it stood invitingly open, they entered without hesitation.

The apartment within was quite large, but devoid of any furniture, save a few boxes and benches, and a miserable excuse for a table.

A low fire was slumbering in a huge stone fireplace, and a single occupant of the room was seated upon a box, seeming fast asleep.

"Wonder where the old woman is? Guess she don't know company has 'riv.'"

As if still unconscious of their presence the solitary man in the room remained motionless.

"Perhaps he can tell," whispered Alf, nodding to the silent individual.

"Reckon not," declared Rock, with a smile. "Ye might as well talk to the moon arter it had been through a sausage grater! He is deaf and dumb!"

Before Howe could express his surprise, the

opposite door opened, and a tall, weazened-faced, slatternly-dressed female of uncertain age entered the apartment at a shambling pace.

"Ho, strangers!" she greeted in a shrill tone, as her small, restless eyes looked our friends close in the face; "make yourselves at home, fer I s'pose ye'll stop with us to-night?"

"I reckon," affirmed Rock; "and we are as hungry as a pack of whoopin' wolves in sight o' a pile o' venison. So pack out combustibles, and we'll pitch in."

"Wa'al, dosay! "'Moose yerselfs as much as you can till my old man comes, and he'll keep yer spirits up till I set things to right. Ye see my poor boy hyar, 'tain't any use to talk to him, 'cause he's lost the use of his walkin' limbs by the rheumatiz, and he can't hear hisself speak, nor speak so he can hear. Poor boy, I feel powerful bad 'bout him."

Mumbling over something to herself, she left the room.

Rock and his companion were not left alone long, however, as a seedy specimen of a man long since past the prime of life entered, with a cordial "How d'y pull up!"

"Reckon ye are strangers 'round hyar," said the new-comer, as he pulled a dry-goods box up in front of the adventurers, and stuck an old, greasy-looking pipe into his mouth. "Did you kem up from Cross-tree?"

"Reckon not," replied Rock. "Huffed it cross the mount'ns from Dry Town."

"Wa'al, I declare to gracious! Ye s'prise me! An' ye are purty kinky yit!"

"Kick the hind sights right off any mule this side o' B'ilin' Spring! We're frisky as young colts turned out to grass, wagh!"

"Wonderful! S'pose ye hev heerd o' the robbery?"

"What one, old coon?"

"Why the 'road-agents o' Cross-tree Holler stopped the stage last night, bu'sted the driver, scart the passengers all to death, and carried off every ounce o' dust they could clap their paws on. I tell ye, strangers, these are gettin' to be awful times. My old woman is 'bout frightened to pieces. Warn't she afeerd o' ye?"

"Nary a chip. I war afeerd—that is, I thought to Jeems Stopple she'd give me a left-hand buss in spite o' all I could do!"

"Queer! and she had the hi-hi-histers this mornin' when I only told her that the stage had been bu'sted."

Then followed a detailed account of the robbery, after which Rock and Alf did full justice to the coarse food Granny Sloan had prepared for them.

A smoke, another talk, and The-Man-from-Texas, with his companion, was guided upstairs into an apartment allotted them for the night.

"By Randel Rock!" exclaimed the Texan, as he dropped squat upon the floor and crossed his legs in true mountain style, "there am fun ahead, or ye may use my head for a snuff-pouch. D'y'e member what the old man sed bout 'em road-agents?"

"Yes; and I'll venture they are the gang that robbed me."

"Es true es blowin' up destruction with salt-peter. But, my old coon-eye, we hev got to work."

"Tell me what I can do, and you will find me there."

"That's the jaw for me. Now, hear my leetle chin-music, and then we will lay our plans. When ye know my hand ye'll take the trick easy."

"Yesterday afternoon as I war trailin' it up the valler, all to on't I heard a rifle-shot, and then another. They kem from no great way off, so I started up that way, expectin' to find friends. I hadn't gone far when I se'd a man a-scootin' it down the mountain as if the old Harry war arter him a-throwin' hot ashes in his face. I spected mischief war 'round big es yer left foot in springtime, so pulled that way to soon hear sum dreadful cries."

"Wal, I found a white man who was shot, and it didn't take me long to corral him as peggin' out like summer bail. I fixed him up a bit, but I knowed it warn't any use. He sed that his name was Roland Maxcy, and that he had been shot by the coyote I had seen huffin' it so much like a scart buffer."

"Then, knowin' he was turnin' up his toes fast, he told me the chap, whose name was Hiram Lore, had hunted him like a peccary ever since he had married t'other's gal."

"Soon after he had got hitched to the woman he had to go away from him, and when he got back ag'in he found that his wife had gone off with this old sweetheart o' hern, though a child had been born to her."

"All that he could learn of her was that she had gone to California, and so he took the trail."

"That war nigh onto eighteen years ago, and he had followed the varmint's lead till then, but he had never seen him. Before the coyote shot him he told him his wife and child war livin', though they had not seen each other for over fifteen years. Of course Maxcy begged to see them, but he war shot instead, and without finding where they lived, or even knowing whether his child was a boy or girl. Queer, wa'n't it?"

"He made me promise I would take the trail, and hunt the coyote down, to find his wife and child. Then he gi'n out, and I war goin' to dig his funeral, when up kem a gang o' cusses and sed they would help me."

"When we had dug the grave, Maxcy showed signs of returning to life and o' course I warn't for planting him. But the varmints war, so we fit for it. I wiped out two, and then they corraled me."

"I see'd 'em bury my poor friend alive, and ye may reckon, I did some tall thinkin' of I didn't spit 'em out."

"Howsomever, I managed to work my strings off, and I lit out on my own hook, to give 'em the slip es true as I am hyar. But I'm in for bizness now."

"Hiram Lore, 'cording to Roland Maxcy's description, is the road-agent chief who bu'sted you."

"Hark!" warned Alf Howe. "What is to pay below?"

"Jeems Stopple!" exclaimed Rock, springing to his feet, "the hull Mexican army is at the door!"

CHAPTER VI.

"HELP! HELP! SAVE!"

A GREAT commotion was going on at the outer door below, but in a moment some one opened it, and our listeners heard a body of men enter the apartment.

"Guess they have got callers," said Howe, as he stood by The-Man-from-Texas.

"I reckon. But open yer ears, and mebbe we shall git a leetle larning."

"Ho, there, Cap; what's the word?" asked one in an excited tone.

"Hold up, Rube, and be more careful how you speak. We have company up-stairs."

"Company?"

"Yes; that infernal Man-from-Texas has turned up ag'in. He and another chap are upstairs now. We must look after them as soon as they git quiet. Anything new down along?"

"Not a bit. That confounded Alf Howe has given us the slip ag'in. I tell you, Cap, he means mischief."

"Pshaw! We are good for that boy, or I'll sell out. Besides, old Divons shells out more liberal. He offers now three hundred if we will capture the fool. I tell you we must get him."

"Hist!" exclaimed a shrill voice at this juncture, "I heerd the Texan and his pard a-talkin' a minute ago, and they'll be hearing ye."

Then, though the conversation went on, Rock and Alf could only hear the indistinct sound of the speakers' voices.

"Randel Rock!" said the Texan, "we are in a purty pickle. I'm pesky anxious to know what is going on."

"Can't we go down the stairs?"

"Jess what popped into my numb head. I am going to try it."

"I will go with you."

"Nary a chip, old coon. D'y'e Jess stand at the door, and if I give the signal be ready fer work. Hyar I crawl down the step."

After looking to the priming of his revolvers, and seeing that they were in good order, The-Man-from-Texas stepped lightly out into the hall. Then noiseless as a shadow, he began to descend the stairs.

Al followed him as far as the top and there waited the adventure of his companion.

With the utmost care Rock succeeded in reaching the door below without having caused any disturbance.

He looked in vain for some crevice where he might gain a view of the adjoining apartment. But he could still hear the men within, and applying his ear close to the thin partition he could distinguish quite plainly the talk which was then continuing.

"I tell ye, Cap, it war a bold push," were the first words he heard.

"That don't matter. We must try again."

"When?"

"To-morrow night. The Dry Town stage is due then, and it will be well loaded with—"

Here the speaker's tone was lowered so much

that The-Man-from-Texas failed to catch the remainder that was said.

He had heard enough, however, to cause him to start a trifle, as collected as he generally was.

"Jeems Stopple!" he muttered to himself, "of that chap talking ain't the black-faced varmint as cracked Roland Maxcy into his grave alive, may I be smoked into a pizen rattler without any music!"

Hearing the sound of voices again he once more bent his whole attention to listening.

"Then it will be a big haul, Cap?"

"The biggest yet. But come; that Texan is snoozin' before this, so I propose we attend to him now. After that we will take a little rest."

"Greed," came the hearty response of at least a dozen voices.

"All right then. Look to your weapons, boys, and have a steady hand, for you know we are after more than common game. That Texan dog don't die easy. Follow me like shadows, and we will deal him a cold hand before he wakes up. I will look after him if you will take that covey with him."

Rock waited to hear no more. With a grim smile upon his sun-bronzed countenance he cautiously returned to his companion.

"What's up?" asked Alf in surprise.

"Nothing! only 'em pesky coyotes are comin' up to lift our skulps. Is your hand steady, my beaver? That am comin' fun."

"How many are there?"

"At least a dozen. And they are led by the varmint es buried poor Maxcy alive. I know him by his voice, but all I ask is one lifter at him, and I'll fix his funeral."

"Hark! what is that?" cried Alf half aloud as an excited movement was suddenly heard down stairs.

Motioning for his companion to be silent, Rock bent anxiously forward in a listening attitude.

A door was heard to be flung violently open and some one rushed into the room below.

"Save me! I am pursued by a lot of ruffians!" cried a clear voice with womanly sharpness in it.

The reply of the men was not heard, but loud cries and oaths were borne to their ears.

"My faith!" exclaimed Rock, "it is a woman!"

Then, high above the confusion came the sharp, quick tones of the masked man saying:

"Where in the world did you come from girl?"

"I was carried off by a lot of bad men, sir; and only this evening succeeded in escaping. Surely you will befriend me!"

Again the reply was unheard.

Alf Howe moved uneasily.

"My God, Rock, can it be possible?"

"There they come!" exclaimed the frightened female. "Oh save me!"

Rock and Alf hurried down the stairs as quietly and as swiftly as possible.

Pausing at the bottom they heard the fierce retort:

"We'll save you, girl. Seize her, men, and see that she don't get away from you!"

A fierce rush followed, and then the building rung with the wild appeal:

"Help! help! help!"

"Quick, men, don't, for mercy's sake, let the jade arouse the whole house! Secure her! Bind her! Quick, for your lives!"

"Save me! help! hel-p!"

"My God!" cried Alfred Howe, in wild excitement, "it is Lilla's voice! Where is the door? Quick! we must save her!"

By this time the whole building rung with the sound of the mad scene enacted within.

CHAPTER VII.

A STARTLING SITUATION.

ROCK had reached the door, and with one wrench of his powerful arm he sent it flying from its hinges, and, closely followed by his companion, he sprang into the midst of the amazed ruffians.

With a revolver in either hand the daring twain faced the excited mob.

"Back!" fairly yelled The-Man-from-Texas, as he leveled his weapons at the foremost, "or I'll shoot you down like coyotes!"

Alf had bounded to the side of the defenseless girl, just as a couple of desperadoes had seized her fiercely by the arms.

Felling them to the floor with a couple of well-directed blows, he drew her to his side, and turned to meet the mad assailants in conjunction with Rock.

"Have courage, my darling," he whispered, and you shall be saved."

"Fire and furies!" hissed one of the desperadoes, "what means this?"

"That you sha'n't make war upon unarmed women!" retorted Rock Randel, as he calmly faced the speaker.

There were twelve men in the room, and all armed to the teeth, but not one familiar face to The-Man-from-Texas among them. The deaf-mute was still sitting in the corner apparently unheeding the exciting scene surrounding him.

The furious horde, for the instant too much surprised to offer assault, glared upon the defiant twain in silence.

"Dog of a Texan!" growled the chief spokesman, "if you value your worthless life, begone ere we riddle you with bullets!"

"Pepper away, old coon. This beaver ain't up for sassage meat yet. But the first man who moves a hair dies!"

By their sudden and prompt action the two heroes held the others at odds for the moment.

In the midst of the strange tableau, Granny Sloan came rushing into the room, crying:

"Oh mercy! what do you dreadful men mean? You will kill and murder us all!"

Rock and Alf dared not for an instant turn from those in front. Had they done so, it would have been certain death. As it was the crisis came quickly.

Loud shouts were heard outside, and three or four coarsely dressed ruffians appeared in the doorway.

Comprehending at a glance the situation, they prepared to assist their allies. But, quick as was their movement, The-Man-from-Texas was even quicker.

Seeing that it was impossible to escape by the outer door, which was blocked by their foes, he turned back toward the stairway crying:

"This way, Alf; quick for your life!"

Howe was not slow in following him. Half-carrying the maiden, he dashed after Rock, who cleared their way through the crowd with fierce sweeps of his strong arms, sending the ruffians headlong right and left.

Before the desperadoes could realize the movement Rock and Alf with their charge had disappeared and the door closed with a slam.

"Come on, old tearers," cried The-Man-from-Texas exultantly, as he braced himself against the stout oaken frame.

The baffled horde uttered fierce threats and hurled themselves against the door.

"Can't you find a timber up there to put up here so to keep the old thing in its place?" panted Randel. "I can hold it, while you hunt one up."

Alf sprung up-stairs, and tearing up a part of the floor he succeeded in removing one of the split slabs, when he carried it to Rock.

By placing one end against the opposite side of the hall-way they soon formed a barricade that promised to withstand a great pressure from the other side.

"Hammer away, old cronies, but let us know when ye force an entrance. By the way, the first head that comes into sight shall be made into a pepper-box! So look out. Rock Randel don't carry wet powder, nor he don't burn it for nothing."

Finding that the door could not be readily forced open, The-Man-from-Texas suggested that they go above where they would be prepared to meet an attack from any direction.

Bang, whang came the furious blows from the enraged assailants below.

"Oh, those dreadful men, we shall all be killed!" said Lilla, as she trembled at the sounds of their foes.

"Never fear, dearest," replied Alf encouragingly. "We may yet escape."

"Do you think so, sir?" she asked, appealing to Rock.

"Of course, purty one. We ain't goin' to let 'em varmints wipe us out while we can stand ag'in 'em. So don't giv' up, but lend us a helping hand."

Lilla Divons was a fair, sweet-faced girl, with a brave heart. Gaining strength from her companions' words she tried to appear calm, as she said:

"What can I do?"

"Nothin' yet; but we will give you a chance soon. Hark! as I live, the coyotes are surrounding the building."

From the sounds there was no doubt of it.

"Let 'em work. I reckon we can stand 'em a siege."

The noise in the room below gradually grew less, until but little was heard.

"They are hatching up some game," declared Rock. "Wal, all is we must keep our peepers wide open and be ready for 'em."

Five minutes wore away without any further indication of danger to the beleaguered friends.

By that time Rock's quick ear caught the

sound of some one trying to force an entrance into another part of the chamber.

"You stand hyar and don't let a varmint outwit ye; I must see what is up over there."

Crossing the floor as silently as a cat about to spring upon its prey, Rock hurried to the spot.

As he came near the place he saw a light suddenly shine through a new opening in the floor, and as the flame grew brighter, he saw that the ruffians were trying to raise one of the boards.

Crouching back in the darkness he saw the flooring pushed up higher and higher, until quite a space was opened. Then, after a moment's silence, a man's head was thrust up through the aperture, speedily followed by his body.

Others would quickly succeed him, and Rock knew his time for action had come.

Springing lightly forward before the intruder was aware of his presence, he seized him in his vice-like grip, to hurl him upon the floor senseless.

Then deftly dislodging the prop that held it in its place, the board fell back with a crash, and again all was darkness.

A few half-smothered curses came up from the baffled horde below, as Rock dragged his prisoner toward the stairs, where he had left Alf and Lilla.

"It's all right," he said, in answer to their anxious inquiries. "I thought we should like a little more company. If I could only find a piece of rope, I would show you some fun, or my name ain't Rock Randel. Hyar, look out for the cuss while I hunt round a leetle and see if I can't find a string to suit me. Hoot away, there, outside, ef you want to, I'm comin' to help you out in a minute."

Soliloquizing thus he searched about in the dark for a cord to carry out the designs that had entered his fertile brain.

All the while the half-savage mob kept up their fearful Babel of sounds, and were trying to devise some scheme by which they could drive the fugitives from their retreat, as they circled about the building.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROCK PLAYS A DARING GAME.

ROCK had been gone so long that Alf and Lilla were getting uneasy when he rejoined them.

"I hev found something that will answer," he said. "Now if you will stand at your post hyar and not let the tarmals fool ye, I'll bring 'em round to the west end o' the building. The minute I give the word, Alf, ye hurry down the stairs with the gal, open the door and git for the horses the coyotes left at the door. Mount one on 'em and ride for Ridley's Bluff like blazes."

"But, what will become of you? I can—"

"Never mind me. I am too old a coon to be ketched napping. Look sharp and mind what I have told you."

With the last injunction The-Man-from-Texas lifted the still unconscious outlaw in his arms and bore him to the further end of the building, where a solitary window was to be seen as the pale starlight glimmered through the dust and cobwebs.

Laying his victim down upon the floor, Rock quickly secured the cord around his body under the arms. Then he fastened the other end to one of the rafters overhead. This done, he removed the window and his intentions were instantly apparent.

Though the desperado was a man of medium size, it cost the strong Texan no great effort to place him upon the window sill.

This last movement partially aroused the fellow and he began to kick lustily.

"Tear away, old rattler; the more the better!" chuckled Randel, as he held him there for a moment.

The watchers outside caught sight of the dangling figure, and in an instant the cry went up:

"Here they come! out of the window!"

With a smile of satisfaction, Rock let his prisoner down the side of the building just as the crowd began to gather beneath.

"Quick, Alf! now's your time!" he warned his companion, as the excitement increased among their foes.

The-Man-from-Texas slowly lowered the frantic outlaw down, until he was suspended upon the rope, when he dodged back out of sight with a chuckle of triumph.

In the brief interval the ruffians to a man had flocked to the end of the house, and stood ready to seize their supposed victim as soon as he came within reach. Ay, as he dangled in mid-air some grew impatient, and the sharp report

of their rifles rung out, mingling with the cries of the unfortunate ruffian.

Meanwhile Alf had not been inactive. With Lilla he dashed down the stairs, and throwing aside the barrier he and the Texan had placed against it, flung open the door, to enter the room below and rushed out into the night.

He found the horses of the outlaws secured near by, and it took but an instant for him to assist Lilla upon the back of one, while he sprang into the saddle of another.

Just as they rode out of the yard and took the road for Ridley's Bluff, Rock appeared in the tavern doorway.

"Hooray for Texas!" he cried, half-aloud. "Now for fun!" and he bounded among the animals hitched near at hand.

The outlaws at the end of the tavern had discovered Alf and Lilla as they rode away, and instantly comprehended that they had been duped, when, with yells of rage, they rushed for their steeds.

Whipping out his long knife, The-Man-from-Texas began cutting them loose, and as the baffled desperadoes came around the corner of the tavern, they saw their animals galloping off at the top of their speed. All but one, and the intrepid Texan was just springing upon its back.

"Shoot him!" yelled the excited leader, but before the volley of shot that followed reached the spot, Rock had gained the highway, and waving his sombrero above his head, disappeared down the road.

"Furies and destruction!" yelled the maddened outlaw; "that dog will escape!"

Before they could recover their horses to give pursuit, he was indeed beyond their reach.

Riding at his breakneck speed, it took Rock but a few moments to overtake his friends.

"Are you unhurt?" asked Lilla, anxiously, as after a few minutes they slackened their pace somewhat.

"Yes; and as lively as a cricket in dog days. I reckon the coyotes won't hold us very hard, as that we needn't kill our horses for fast driving."

Thus they moved at a more moderate gait.

"I guess we had better go to Sanford's. He keeps the post-office, you know; and a better man ain't in the country. He and I are regular pals, too, and no side-show. Yell be at him there, Miss Lilla, and Alf and I can trot round and look arter things."

Miss Divons started in surprise as the Texan spoke her lover's name.

"Never fear, Lilla," he said; "Mr. Randel knows my secret and it is safe with him."

"But is it safe for you to be seen? I fear you will be recognized and if you should—oh! I tremble to think of what would be your fate."

"Have courage, dearest; I will leave it with our friend to say what we had better do. He has seen me with my disguise off and knows how much it changes me."

"I say the old Harry won't know ye. But I must give ye a new handle. So ye must answer to—let me see—yes, that'll do—Tom Smith."

"All right, Rock; I will remember."

"Don't ye forget, either, Miss Lilla. So it's all fixed. We'll go to Sanford's to-night; and to-morrow to Cross-tree City by way of Dry Town."

The next hour passed in comparative silence, when they suddenly came in sight of a small mining settlement, which lay at the base of the mountain range.

Ridley's Bluff, for such was its name, was a thriving place though of but a few months' growth. Already it had its duly elected authorities and claimed the dignity of being called a "city."

An occasional light was seen glimmering from some of the rude huts that were crowded in upon either side as our party rode down the main street; and when they reached "Central Square" they found it nearly as bright as day from the lights of a neighboring building that bore the inscription in gilt lettering:

"Lion's Rest."

"The big shebang o' the city," said Rock, with a nod of the head. "The post-office is just below."

Turning the street corner they came upon a two-story dwelling bearing the sign:

"POST OFFICE."

"Hyar's whar we'll put up," said Rock, as he bounded upon the door after finding it fastened.

CHAPTER IX.

ROCK IN TIGHT QUARTERS.

"Who's there?" asked a deep bass voice as The-Man-from-Texas repeated his thumping.

"Rock Randel and a couple o' friends."

"Good! You shall come in," and the door was quickly opened, when a stout, pleasant-faced man in middle life greeted the Texan with a cordial welcome.

"We have had a first class row this afternoon and to please the women-folks, I caused the doors to be bolted, as I hardly dreamed of callers at this late hour. However, you are heartily welcome."

We need not dwell upon the explanations that followed, but Lilla was happy to know that she had found friends, and both Mr. Sanford and his wife were deeply interested in her story, as well as her own frank manner.

"You shall stay here with us until the danger is over," declared good Mrs. Sanford. "I do hope they will destroy that gang of road-agents or it will not be safe for any one to go out after dark. And, don't you think, no less than ten men have been shot and robbed in the city within in three days?"

"Never mind, wife," said her husband; "now that Col. Ridley has been made mayor we may hope for better times. They are holding a celebration at the Lion's Rest to-night in honor of the event. He keeps the tavern, you know, and is our leading man, and who gave his name to the place?"

"So I hev heerd," replied The-Man-from-Texas, "and as I hev never seen him, I have an idee o' trotting over to his shebang. Want to go, Tom?" he continued, addressing Alf.

"Don't go to that dreadful place!" cried Lilla: "you will both be killed."

"Never fear for that, party one; but Tom needn't go unless he wants to. I am going because I hev perticler bizness. Reckon ye'll let me in meibye?" he said to Mr. Sanford.

"Certainly. But you can't be too careful, Rock."

"I reckon. So hyar I scoot. Ef ye don't see me ag'in look out for the gal, Tom," and the last having decided to remain in safer quarters, The-Man-from-Texas went out alone.

"Now I ain't got only this coon to look arter, and I feel better," he mused as he gained the street.

Had Rock realized the danger he was running into he might have hesitated before doing as he did.

Reaching the square he passed up the street for a short distance, and then crossed over to go down a corresponding space when he paused in front of the "Lion's Rest." The truth was he did not care for any one to know that he had come from Sanford's, for reasons of his own.

Within, highest excitement was rife, but, after assuring himself that his fire-arms were in readiness for use in case of need, he pulled his sombrero down over his face and boldly entered.

His entrance was greeted with a stolid stare from a score or more of heavily-bearded, coarsely-dressed miners, who had gathered around the bar, drinking and carousing.

Rock was but a little acquainted in the place, and he hoped no one would recognize him.

"Ho, stranger!" cried a tall, weather-beaten individual who savored strongly of the mountains as well as of the mines, "ye are jess in season; so pouy up, and lift a bumper to our new mayor. Hurray for Colonel Ridley, futer guv'ner o' all California and the Pacificker sea with Mexico throwed in!"

As if one throat had uttered the cry the building rung with the shout of every spectator, The-Man-from-Texas pitching his voice to the highest key.

"Now, death and destruction to the road agents and highway varmints o' the kentry, and ten foot o' rope for Alf Howe, their leader!" cried the tall miner, when again the applause was deafening.

"Now for a bu'ster o' p'izen! My swallower is as raw as a pepper plaster on the north side o' a rock. Kem, old hoses, shank up hyar and the mayor 'll pay the bill. Kem, stranger, yer turn to lead off. Gi'n us yer handle and we'll toss to ye health."

"Whoop! hurray! I'm the Coon from Live Oak, I am!" exclaimed Rock, as he sprung forward and brought his fist down upon the bar with a crash that sent the glasses flying in every direction. "Turn out yer benzine! Heap it up high as the Rocker Mount'ins!"

In an instant the bar-tender came forward and filled the glasses to their brim.

Then, midst the wild confusion, the noisy drinkers drained them at a single gulp. All save Rock, who had learned long before that to keep a steady hand he must have a level head, and seldom, if ever, drank any liquor. Thus, while the others were drinking, he tossed his iron on the floor unnoticed.

"Ain't the cakewalk yet?" asked one.

"Queer," said another, as they received a negative answer. "Wonder how he will look with his whiskers off. Tain't every chap as would lose his beard to pay a bet."

"Right. But the mayor is true blue, every time. When he says a thing he means it."

"Yes; and when he offered an extra two hundred for the outlawed Alf Howe he meant bizness. I tell ye, he'll make it warm for the boy when he leads the Vigilantes down thar-tomorrer."

"Where do ye s'pose the chap is hiding?"

"Why, bless ye, he war seen only this artnoon down in Cross-tree hollow."

"Sho!"

"You bet! and he'll hev to kem, too, I tell ye, boys. I wouldn't give a goat's ear for his chance. That Man-from-Texas 'll hev to stretch a bit o' rope afore another morn, mark me for that."

"Shovel up the coyote, and we'll dig his funeral!" broke in Rock.

"Rah for the Coon from Live Oak!"

"Hyar kem's the mayor!" cried one, and in an instant all was quiet.

Randel fell back among the majority of the crowd toward the door. To speak the truth, he thought it best to be on the look-out for an escape. If any there should recognize him his game would be up.

At the moment a ringing footstep was heard coming from the interior of the building, and then a nervous appearing man appeared behind the bar.

At sight of him a loud shout went up from the crowd, but Rock was so much absorbed by the looks of the new-comer that he failed to join in the cry.

He saw a rather prepossessing looking man of middle age, with a smile upon his florid countenance. More he failed to notice, for his gaze suddenly rested upon a crimson scar or birthmark upon the right cheek just below the eye. In an instant he thought of the murderer of Roland Maxcy, and had not the person before him had a cleanly-shaven face he would have felt certain that it was he!

"Jeems Stoppole!" he muttered under his breath, "can it be him?"

"Then ye hev kept yer wager, colonel?" said a red-faced miner, as the mayor greeted the crowd.

"Yes," he replied in a quick tone that made Rock start in unfeigned surprise. "When I bet whiskers with a gentleman and I lose, they must come off," and he stroked his smooth face with another smile.

"Hooray fer ye, mayor! But, hyar's a new man fer ye. Kem up, Coon from Live Oak, and show yer mug," and half-a-dozen of the throng seized Rock in high glee and pulled him forward to face Ridley.

Randel's keen vision saw that the "mayor" started back with a look of terror, but, quickly recovering himself he said calmly enough:

"I am glad to meet you, my friend, for I trust I can call you such," and he grasped Rock's hand.

"The Coon from Live Oak knows his pards every time and no side-show," replied The Texan as he bent his gaze upon the man before him, feeling that he was in close quarters.

As Ridley seized him by the hand he hurled himself upon The-Man-from-Texas to throw him to the floor as he cried:

"Quick, men! Help me! 'Tis Rock Randel, leader of the road-agents!"

CHAPTER X.

ROCK "STRIKES THE TRAIL."

HAD a thunderbolt fallen among them the spectators could not have been more surprised.

Rock Randel was not easily caught.

Diving on the instant the intentions of Colonel Ridley, that person had barely uttered his command for help, when Rock dealt him a blow with his left hand that sent him reeling to the floor. Then, before the amazed crowd could offer any assistance he bounded toward the door reaching it at a leap, sending the spectators right and left headlong.

"Hyar's the beaver! Kem and trap him!" he shouted defiantly as he flung open the door and dashed out.

"Don't let him escape!" roared the discomfited mayor as he regained his feet. "Blockheads, why don't you capture him?"

Aroused at last the half-drunk miners rushed out in noisy pursuit of The-Man-from-Texas.

The foremost caught sight of a dark form fleeing 'round the corner of an adjacent street, but when they reached the spot their man was nowhere to be seen.

"Tain't any use!" declared one, when they had spent fifteen minutes in a fruitless search; "we might as well try to ketch chain lightning as that long-haired Texan."

"Ef ye hadn't been a set of wooden-heads we might have captured him," affirmed the crest-fallen mayor. "I had him, once."

"But I reckon ye war glad enough to let go. Reckon ye didn't keep him a long spell, enny-way."

Mastering the thoughts of his defeat as best he could, Ridley led the way back into the Lion's Rest.

"We must be warned by this and lay our plans with more care in the future. He must be got out of the way or we can look for no peace."

Meanwhile Rock had gained one of the cross streets, and following down in the darkness for a short distance, kept shady, as he would have said, until he could hear no more of his foes, when he cautiously made his way toward the post-office.

Finally he reached it in safety, and was ushered into the presence of Mr. Sanford and Alf, who were anxiously waiting for his return.

"Then you have come back without a scratch?" said the genial postmaster. "We were getting anxious about you."

"Nary a scratch, old beaver. But, Jeems on a kickin' mule, ye ought to have seen me git up and git!"

"What? did you get into trouble?" asked Howe in alarm.

"I reckon! We got up a tearin' old sideshow, I tell ye. Ye oughter seen me floor the mayor."

In answer to his friend's inquiries, he told of his adventure, winding up with:

"That are Coon from Live Oak didn't fool the mayor, 'cause he 'membered like a book. Howsumever, I hev l'arned sumthin' that is worth a pile. Alf Howe—I mean Tom Smith, but, as long as Dan knows our biz it is all right—ye hev got to keep yer peepers open. But we hev got the varmints we are arter or ye may tote me off fer kindlin's for the Old Boy. I hev struck a trail and 'tis fresh as a p'izen snake! Wagh!"

Later that same night when the last loafer had left the Lion's Rest, and all the hubbub and excitement of the evening had died away, a solitary, dust-laden traveler paused at the door.

A glimmering light still shone from within, but he hesitated as if afraid to enter.

"I must risk it," he muttered, as he glanced uneasily around. "Stay; I wonder if I can see him from that window?" and while he spoke thus to himself he advanced toward the spot from whence the light was seen.

Being careful to keep back in the shadows, he peered into the room, his gaze becoming fixed upon some object with an intensity that held him in his position for several minutes like a statue.

"Yes; it is he!" he said at last. "And he moves. He is about to shut up for the night, and I must go in or he will refuse me admittance," and he shook his threadbare garments, with a low chuckle.

Seeking the door again he pushed it open and boldly entered the apartment.

Colonel Ridley started to his feet in surprise, and turned upon the new-comer with a look of anger at his intrusion.

Now that he came before the light, he presented a sorry-looking spectacle. His ill-fitting garb hung in tatters, while well coated with dirt. His long hair fell about his neck and a goodly portion of it over his face in tangled masses, while a straggling beard nearly covered the remainder of his face, that evidently had not been washed for many a day.

"What will you have?" asked the mayor, as he shambled across the floor and sunk into a seat near him.

"Something to eat, squire, and a place to lay these weary limbs."

"Have you come far?"

"Well, yes; I have been tramping nigh onto fifty years!"

Biting his lip to keep back his vexation, Ridley said:

"I think you must be a stranger in these parts."

"I don't know. I find my fellow men wherever I go, and I always feel that my wants will be seen to among my kind."

Again the tavern-keeper came near showing his anger at the man's singular conduct.

"But we have never met before and are therefore strangers."

"I am not so certain," replied the other, staggering to his feet and facing the amazed mayor. "I have not forgotten that scar. You are Hiram Lore, and we have met before!"

Had the floor opened at his feet Colonel Ridley could not have shown greater astonishment. Ay, we might say consternation.

"Who are you?" he gasped.

"Where is Roland Maxcy?" came the reply.

"Dead."

"Ha! you know, then? You do not die—"

"I deny everything!" shrieked Ridley with an oath. "Who in the fiend's name are you?"

"His friend, 'Tis madness for you to deny what I already know. But where is Roland Maxcy's wife and child?"

"Dog! I'll hear no more! Out of my—"

"Not so fast, my old chap, or I'll dig your funeral. Come! Where are the woman and child? Tell me quick!" and the speaker had placed a muzzle to the trembling man's temple.

"I—I—"

"Fire! fire! fire!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE DOOMED CITY.

"FIRE! fire! fire!"

With awful distinctness the alarm rang upon the night air.

Already the tramp of feet could be heard as the frightened inhabitants of the place rushed toward the scene of the conflagration.

Rock Randel with the muzzle of his revolver at the temple of his foe, for it was none other than the Texan in a disguise rigged out for him by Sanford to force from Colonel Ridley the secret he imagined the mayor had locked in his heart, instinctively turned for one instant aside. For one moment he relaxed his vigilance, when the other saw his chance, and, quick as a flash, sprung to his feet, at the movement hurling The-Man-from-Texas back against the bar with a fearful shock.

"Lie there, dog!" cried Ridley, as he bounded toward the door.

Before he could reach it, though, Rock was by his side, the Texan's strong grasp was on his shoulder; and finding escape impossible the man turned, and the two were locked in each other's arms.

Both were powerful men and no novices in the work they had undertaken. For the time they forgot—in fact, they could not well use their weapons, and thus they fought with main strength, each trying in vain to overpower his antagonist.

Rock's vise-like grip clutched Ridley by the throat, and the mayor exerted his utmost to hurl the Texan to the floor.

Still the wild cries outside increased, and the terrified people rushed blindly to and fro as the oncoming flames seemed to laugh at their futile efforts to stay their ravages, and drove them back toward the mountain.

The fire had caught at the upper end of the village and a strong north wind was sweeping it forward at the speed of a race-horse, the lines of wooden buildings that stood on either side the street burning like tinder.

Little thought was given to the saving of property, for if all escaped with their lives they would indeed have cause to be thankful.

Unmindful of this fearful scene, and the terrible death they were courting by hazarding their existence in the building that was already marked with the fiery touch of the elements, Rock Randel and his foe fought on.

Now struggling down upon their knees and anon staggering to their feet, they carried on the contest which was so squarely pitted that for a time it seemed beyond the power of either to gain a victory without the help of a friend.

At last, however, The-Man-from-Texas began to show greater power of endurance, and as his adversary commenced to pant for breath, he threw back his body to give more force to his action, and concentrating his strength for the decisive move, he was suddenly hurled Ridley to the floor with a crash that made the building fairly tremble.

"Randel Rock! Won't ye give up now?" he cried, as he planted his knee upon the fallen man's breast, and held down the struggling mayor. "I reckon this coon ain't played out yet, but ye held out game."

"Mercy! let me up! I am strangling to death!"

"Not yet, old coyote! Ye don't git on yer pins till ye answer my questions! Where am—"

"Don't! For God's sake let me up! Help! he—I—"

"None o' that, ye varmint!" hissed Rock, as he pressed his hand upon the prostrate speaker's

throat. "Tell me, quick, is Roland Maxcy's wife living?"

"I don't kn—o—w!"

"You lie! Kem, speak quick! This building is on fire! You haven't a minute to spare!"

"Yes; she lives!"

"Where am she?"

"I—"

"Quick! the fire is coming nearer!" and again the Texan's grip closed upon the wretch's throat.

"I don't know! Help!"

The crackling of the flames at this moment was plainly heard, and glancing up Rock saw that the fire had burned through upon the building overhead. Already the cinders began to fall by his side.

"Do you hear?" he cried, fiercely glaring upon the cowering Ridley like an enraged tiger. "I will die here with you in these flames, unless you tell me where she is! Speak, quick!"

Mentally Rock had measured the distance to the door, and was gathering his strength to spring into the open air as soon as he heard the desired answer.

"Where am she?" he repeated.

"The last I knew, she was at Granny Sloan's."

"And the child! what of that?"

"I don't know. I—"

"Hold! Is it living?"

"Yes."

"Tell me if it is a boy or a girl."

Before an answer could be given, the door was burst open and half a dozen men sprung in upon the exciting scene, which was lit to the brightness of midday by the fire.

"Help!" groaned Ridley, and, as the crowd saw the combatants, to understand the peril of their leader, they hastened to his rescue.

Without stopping to see whether Rock was friend or foe, the foremost dealt him a furious blow upon the head, and the others pulled him back into the further corner of the room where he fell senseless.

Then, seizing Ridley by the shoulders they dragged him out of the burning building just as the roof fell with a crash.

By this time the crowd had been driven from the street by the heat of the flames, and all that could be seen of Ridley's City was one living street of fire.

Women and children shrieking in anguish, and roughly clad men rushing hither and thither with bitter curses made an awful babel of sounds.

Many were missing who it was supposed must have perished in the conflagration.

Colonel Ridley came to his senses to find himself surrounded by the excited throng, but safe from the fire!

"Where is he who came so near taking my life—Rock Randel?" were his first words.

"He has not come out of the burning building, and must have died in the flames!"

"Then I am satisfied, though half of California is destroyed!"

There was one who, bearing the fate of Rock, turned pale. "Twas Alf Howe.

After the alarm of the fire he, with Sanford, had looked to the safety of their loved ones; and then, while the other remained with the frightened ladies who had been carried to a place of safety he had sought for his friend.

"Rock dead?" he repeated to himself. "Noble fellow, it is too bad. And to have died in that fearful manner—lured to death! What shall I do now?" and feeling the keenest pangs for the fate of his generous-hearted friend he returned to his companions, to make another discovery more heart-rending than the first.

Lilla was missing—could not be found!

Mr. Sanford had left his wife and Lilla together for a moment to assist an unfortunate miner in escaping from the fire, when he was struck by a falling timber.

His wife had rushed to his side, in grief, and when he was borne to a safe distance, though a few minutes had elapsed, Lilla was nowhere to be found.

Alf renewed the search at once, and others readily joined in the undertaking, but no trace of her could be found.

No one had known her, or remembered seeing her, which of course was not a wonder, considering the excitement of the hour.

Had she perished in the flames? Somehow he could not think so, and intuitively he felt that she had met with a fate even worse—become perhaps the prey of marauding demons in human form!

The night wore away and the morrow's sun looked down upon a haggard people at Ridley's Bluff, while all that was left of their homes was a pile of smoldering ashes!

CHAPTER XII.

THROUGH FIRE.

The gray light of morning was just tinging the east as the solitary figure of a man might have been seen standing at the base of the bluff which overhung the doomed settlement.

He had just arisen from the earth where he had been lying, evidently sleeping after great fatigue.

He was a tall, powerful framed person, but so wild and strange did he appear that had any one seen him they must have started in amazement. Ay, even his most intimate friends would not have recognized him as the dashing Rock Randel—Dandy Rock, the *beau ideal* of a plainsman.

The remnant of his clothing, for his person was scarcely covered, hung in tatters, burned and blackened by the fire. His long hair was all gone and even his dark mustache and eyebrows had been burned to the skin, while his whole face was scorched and blistered. Truly he had been through a fiery furnace.

"Jeems Stopple!" he muttered with a grim smile, as he moved his hand over his bared head. "I reckon this am a purty go. Hyar I am burnt up like a scrumptious moccasin! Went in there slick as a trapped beaver, and kem out bold as a drowned rat, wagh! Nary a weapon, top-knot a goner, Rock Randel, ye are no better than a sneakin' possum a shinuin' a cottonwood by starlight!"

The sound of hoof-strokes caused The-Man-from-Texas to pause and gaze anxiously down the road which lay at his feet.

"Sum one is comin'," he said, "and ef I don't want to scare 'em to death I'd better git back into the brush. 'Sides I arn't particular about everybody seein' me in this predicimony. Reckon I'd look well side a picked goose!"

Soliloquizing thus he drew back into a thicket near at hand, just as a party of horsemen came into sight.

From his position he commanded but a limited view of the highway, and the riders were passing him before he discovered a woman in their midst.

"My gracious!" he muttered, as he parted the bushes so as to get a better view, "if that ain't Miss Lilla may I be shot! But, Alf arn't there; and 'em chaps don't look very clever towards her. Spose thar am mischief in ther game," and he stepped from his concealment, to catch a last glimpse of them as they rode around a curve in the way.

"I hev half a mind to foller, but 'twouldn't be any use as I am now. Time enough by-and-by. Reckon I'll look for Alf and Dan first."

With the words Rock started down the road and knowing that Sanford had friends just below the city where he should be the most likely to find him, he shaped his course in that direction.

The postmaster was indeed there, though lying in a critical situation.

Rock's appearance was hailed with unbound delight.

"Hyar I am all thar ar' left o' me," he said. "Reckon I look like a peeled onion, but I tell ye this coon arn't smoked out yet. Whar's Alf?"

Then he was told of the mysterious disappearance of Lilla and that Alf was still in search of her.

"Gi'n me a shooter," he cried. "I hev seen the trail. 'Em coyotes have tote her off."

Alfred came back from his fruitless errand soon afterward, and his surprise can be well imagined when he met Rock alive and as jovial as ever.

"D'yee see, my beaver, my top-knot is a goner. I hev been skulped alive, and I peet I look wuss nor a dead Injin."

"Better so than not at all, Rock. But, how did you escape? Every one thinks you are dead."

"Jesso! Wal, I scooted jess as slick as a greased forkintine! Reckon I kem to myself when I did mighty sudint, and finding thar no one to look arter me, I up and tore for the back door, seein' es how the fire had already ketched a purty smart grip on the front one. When I got out, which was only by the smallest chance as my looks show, I seed that the folks war all in front, and not particular 'bout 'em seein' me. I kept shady, and hyar I am."

"A narrow escape truly, Rock. If Lilla were only safe I should not care."

"Alf, I hev struck her trall," and Rock continued with a description of what he had witnessed that morning.

"We must go to her rescue at once," cried the young man.

"Don't be too fast, my coon-deer. I reckon I hev a plan I want to dry fast. Ef we start off blind-like, we may git corralled in spite of ten rows of live-oaks. Now I smell a bait at the Wayside Home, and I think we had better set our toes for that shebang. Thar arn't nary a hoss we can git this side o' Dry Town, so let's rig up like we were strangers, and take the stage this afternoon, to poke our noses up round that way. Ef we don't smell the coyotes out and hev sum fun, ye may stuff my head full of powder and tech her off kerbang."

"But, what will become of Lilla while we dally here?"

"Thar now, don't git so peky uneasy es ef ye war steppin' on a nest of yaller jackets. We shall git round as quick as we should in any other way and twice as sartin. I sha'n't be surprised if we find her at Granny Sloan's."

Alf yielded to Rock's superior judgment, and preparations were begun at once to carry the plan into effect.

In order to escape recognition it was decided that Rock should wear Alf's false wig and beard, while another was made for him.

They decided to pass themselves off as sporting gentlemen, which would allow them to go well armed without creating suspicion.

Alf, who was to be called Ned Armstrong by his companion, wore a full red beard and hair, which the ingenious Rock had prepared.

The Man-from-Texas, somewhat agreeable to nature, aspired to be more of a swell, and wore a light-colored suit of dandy pattern, while he stuck upon his nose a pair of green goggles. No one could have recognized him, not even his most intimate friends, and if he acted his part well he seemed certain of deceiving his foes. He answered to the "handle" of Dick Bandy.

"There, Ned, old peeper, we are up in style, and if we don't miss a pull we'll flax 'em. Say, how does these lookers shine on my pictur, my boy! They feel ternal queer," and he adjusted his glasses for at least the hundredth time.

"Oh, they'll do well enough if you will let them alone, Rock."

"Rock? Did I hyar ye say that, old pard? Ye may call me stone, gravel, pitchknot—anything but Rock! D'yee hyar?"

"Pardon me; I will be more careful in the future."

"All right. Let's go down to Arlins to meet the stage. 'Tis time 'twas thar."

Leaving their friend, Dan Sanford, with the hope that he would be well when they came back from their perilous expedition, if they ever did return, Rock and Alf took a cross-cut down to a small settlement a couple of miles below where the Dry Town stage passed daily.

They were barely in season, for it was about to start as they got there; but, springing aboard, they were soon being borne back to Ridley's Bluff, and thence the driver soon whipped on towards Cross-tree City by the way of the Wayside Home.

Besides Rock and Alf there were four passengers, all of them apparently middle-aged men.

While two of them sat back in the corner in almost total silence, the others were very profuse in their remarks, and after discussing the late fire, ventured to make a few inquiries in regard to the affairs of our friends, which were met with evasive replies upon the part of Rock, who began to "Smell fun" as he whispered to his companion.

It was nearly dark and the Texan knew they must be near the Wayside Home, which was the stopping place for the stage on its route.

Outwardly The Man-from-Texas, was as calm as usual, but his mind was filled with conflicting thoughts. Instinctively he felt they were running into danger. Nor was he far from right.

"That's a splendid-looking rifle you have there," remarked one of the talking twain, speaking to Alf. "I used to have one of that pattern. Will you let me see it for a moment, please?"

Without thinking of what was coming, Alf handed his weapon to the other, just as the stage came to a sudden stand-still, and a sharp, imperative voice was heard to say:

"Hold up, driver, or you are a dead man!"

CHAPTER XIII.

ROCK IN A NEW ROLE.

The stage had stopped so abruptly that the shock threw the passengers from their seats. As they staggered forward, the two nearest men threw themselves upon Rock and Alf intending beyond doubt to overpower them in season to meet the others if they offered opposition, and at the same moment the door was flung open.

"Quick, men, throw them!" exclaimed the man outside.

The desperadoes had counted without knowing their odds.

Rock Randel had calculated their game, and as he saw them spring for himself and companion a quick, sharp blow to the right, another to the left, and they fell sprawling upon the bottom of the coach!

As he turned to meet the others, he was seized from behind and pulled outside the vehicle, where he fell upon the ground.

Alf had been too bewildered to move until he saw his companion fall, and then as the two silent men sprung out to meet the road-agents he followed.

A couple of men had sprung out from under the driver's box, and the robbers found themselves met by an unexpected force of armed men.

"Down with them!" yelled the masked leader; but, taken so completely by surprise, his followers drew back, and as two of their number fell, retreated in dismay.

Seeing that inevitable capture awaited them the chief cried:

"To the woods for your lives!"

"Don't let the dogs escape!" shouted one of the stage's defenders. But it was useless to follow them up, and thus the outlaws got away, save the two who had been shot and the precious twain who lay senseless in the coach.

"It's too bad to let that leader get away after we have come 'way up here to capture him. But our plan hasn't failed entirely for we have a part of the gang, and I am thinking the rest have learned a lesson they won't forget soon. Go on, driver, for Cross-tree, and we will bind the pair we have inside. Guess they are worth carrying home."

Rock, who had done more work really than all the others, was now writhing in the ditch in greatest agony.

"What is the trouble, my good fellow?" asked the officer, compassionately.

"I am done for!" he groaned. "That black faced one hit me an orful sockdollegger, and I'm wiped out!"

"Oh, have courage, my man. It may not be as bad as you think."

"Oh—oh! I can't keep my wind-mill goin'! I'm going under fast!"

"Is there nothin' we can do for you, Rock?" asked Alf anxiously, as he bent over his friend.

"Laying on a rock? Yes; git me into the wagon, but be keerful! That varmint smashed my inards all into sassage meat!"

The others willingly lent their help, and, amid the groans and supplications of the wounded Texan, he was placed inside the stage.

"Oh, Ned, my boy, this is orful!" he said as Alf stood by with all the tenderness of a brother.

"Don't you feel any better, Dick?"

"Would you feel any better, old pard, ef you had your liver and lights and everything else all jammed into a last year's snake's skin? But let 'em trot along with their mules. They musn't mind my hollerin'. Mebbe I can stand it to git up to Granny Sloan's."

Cracking his whip the driver urged his team forward, and once more the old stage went rumbling on its way.

Rock tossed to and fro by the lurching of the stage complained most bitterly.

"It's no use, Ned, old boy," he said as Alf did all in his power to alleviate his pain. "I hev got my check for—ah—oh! that pain in my side! Ain't we got most to Granny Sloan's? I can't go any furder without makin' this team into a funeral!"

"We are sorry for you, poor fellow," said the officer kindly, "and we will see that you are left at the Wayside in good hands. We shouldn't have fared so well but for you. What is your name?"

"Dick—oh—Bandy, I guess that varmint has fixed my breathing machine! Do I grow white, Ned? I feel like a mop-rag in dog days!"

At this moment the stage stopped, when it was announced that the Wayside Home was reached.

"Can't you ride on to Cross-tree?" asked the officer.

"No; I feel awful antics cut up by 'em quirks and twists in my inards! I ain't long fer ennything. Git me inter the house and mebbe a pepper sling will start me dazing. Handle me like eggs fer I'm well worn through."

Alf assisted by two others carefully lifted the suffering Texan from the coach, and bore him to the house.

"He has been badly hurt," said the officer who had preceded them to Granny Sloan as the

met him at the door with anxious inquiries, "and we must leave him in your care."

"All right, sir. Here, bring him inter the next room and I'll fix a buffer hide for him to rest on."

Rock was made as comfortable as possible, and seeing that no more could be done, the officer with his followers went out to resume their journey to Cross-tree, Alf having signified his intention of staying with his friend.

Suddenly Rock, who had laid back upon his couch apparently feeling easier started up crying:

"Randel—goat! whar's my shooter? Hev 'em coyotes tooted it off? I want to go under ef they hev. Look quick, Ned!"

Alf hastened out in season to get the Texan's coveted weapon as well as his own, which he had forgotten in his excitement, as the stage was starting off.

"Thanks, old pard," replied Rock, as he grasped his trusty rifle once more. "Of course I never expect to use him ag'in, but, when I go under I want ye to send him home to my old dad and ma as a part of their boy! D'yeh yar, Ned?"

"I sha'n't forget you, Dick."

"Jesso, Wal, stand the shooter right up lyar in the corner whar I can look at him. I know it will make me feel better."

After this The-Man-from-Texas settled back, seeming more comfortable.

"How did it happen?" asked the old man Sloan a few minutes later.

Alf was about to answer when Rock interposed:

"Let me dig it out, my pard, 'cause I know nearer whar the shot struck. Ye see, stranger, me and my friend war off on a bu'st, and a comin' up in the stage with four t'other chaps. All ter onc'e the wagin stopped to rest mighty sudint, and not tellin' me o' the fact I kept right on, and the fust I knewed I war dancing on my head. The next I knewed 'em are chaps war poundin' me promiscussum, and I war pulled out o' the cart, and if it hadn't been for a big chap with a dirty cloth on his face I'd a been no more than a tumble-bug with his jacket bu'sted! As 'tis I reckon I am a pizen goned coon. Ain't ye got a little pepper sling fer me? It would be 'mazing good 'bout pining this pain. I feel holler, too!"

Rock's story elicited some sympathy, and the best set himself about preparing the "sling."

"I can't help shuddering, Rock," said Alf, as he and the Texan were left alone for a brief interval, "as I think of the fate of poor Lilla while we are here with no way to aid her. I must start alone in the morning if you are no better."

CHAPTER XIV.

ROCK'S RUSE.

"Don't git nervous, my boy," replied The-Man-from-Texas; "this may be all for the best. Thar kems my sling, and I know that'll do me a heap o' git-up."

Old Sloan, followed by his deaf-mute son, entered the room at this juncture and offered Rock the "sling" he had prepared, which the latter drained with apparent eagerness.

"Reckon I'll hev another swig. I feel a heap sight brighter 'ready."

Thus between his aches and groans Rock sipped his "pepper sling," and seemed better. In fact it wasn't long before he broke out into matches of song.

Alf, unable to understand his friend's actions, grew nervous. Was the Texan losing his mind from the effect of his injuries?

"Whoop-la! Hi—hi—oh—hum! I'm pesky—my peepers are tired, old pard. Ye had better git to snoozing young to-night, 'cause we want to start the sun with us in the morning. Snooze sound, but look out for rats! I see—yah, I'm a goner!" and muttering something about "coons, beavers and pepper sling" he became motionless as a log, though his heavy breath proclaimed that he was "still thar."

Completely puzzled Alf showed his uneasiness so much that the others noticed it when Granny Sloan said:

"Oh, never fear for him, Mr. Armstrong; I reckon he'll be all right in the mornin'. Guess the old man fixed his bitters a little too stout. Hadn't you better spread yer bones for the night? Ye must be tired arter all ye hev done."

Alf saw that they were anxious to get rid of him, and his first thought was to request to remain with Rock, but while he hesitated he

went to his friend's side, ostensibly to see if nothing more could be done for his comfort.

"Git to bed, but sleep with your eyes open!" hissed Randel, as he bent over him.

Trusting the Texan fully Alf delayed no longer.

"We will call you if your friend is worse," said Sloan, as he showed Howe into the same chamber he and The-Man-from-Texas had occupied but a few nights before.

"I would like to know the mystery of Rock's conduct," thought Alf, as he threw himself upon the rude couch, and impatiently waited for the hours to drag themselves away.

As time passed on nothing occurred to arouse his suspicions or excite his fears, and he gradually began to grow sleepy until he fell into a doze.

Meanwhile Rock lay like one in a drunken stupor, apparently unconscious of all that was transpiring around him.

By and by the inmates of the house ceased their busting about and the three gathered in the room where the Texan was resting.

"Time he was here," said the old man, arising and going to the window. "Ah, as I live, he has come and two others with him," whereupon the speaker hurriedly left the apartment.

Left alone with the deaf-mute the old woman began to travel the floor uneasily.

"When will these doings end?" she muttered, half-aloud. "I'm tired and sick o' this way o' living, and do wish Jack would go back to the East. We were fools for ever comin' into this heathen land!" and she wrung her hands as if her thoughts were far from being pleasant.

Dumb Dick arose and hobbled out of the room.

"Go!" exclaimed the old hag, shaking her fist after him. "You have caused us all this trouble! If it hadn't been—"

The entrance of her husband and three others checked her speech, and she sunk down into a seat in the corner of the room in silence.

"Is the girl all right?" asked the tallest of the men, as he drew a seat up by the side of Sloan.

"She was, half an hour ago," replied a second, in that quick, sharp voice which Rock Randel would have recognized as belonging to him who wore the dark mask, but whose rather good-looking face was now seen. He was a blonde-haired man, in the prime of life.

"Good! And the woman?"

As he spoke he turned his face toward the light, when the countenance of Mayor Ridley, of Ridley's Bluff, was to be seen! Yes; the birthmark was there, and the speaker was none other than the man!

"We sent her to the hollow, when the girl came, as you ordered. It won't do to have too many here at once."

"Right. But who have you here?" And he started in alarm, as he saw for the first time Rock Randel.

"Only a traveler, who was wounded on the stage to-day."

"A traveler? Why in the name of common safety have you allowed him to remain here? And he has heard all we have said!"

"Never fear; he is dead drunk, and cannot harm us."

"Better kill him! Dead men tell no tales!" And drawing a knife, the speaker advanced to the unconscious Texan, to carry his words into effect.

"Better let him alone," admonished old Sloan. "He has a friend up-stairs who might give us trouble. I'll warrant this one will not disturb us."

"Oh, well, if you'll risk it, of course I will. But you can't be too careful how you take in strangers, for the officers are hunting us down like hounds."

"And there ain't one half so dangerous as that Man-from-Texas. I verily believe he would go through fire and water to carry out his purpose!"

"He has, Arnold; but that fire was too much for him last night. He perished in it."

"Is he—Rock Randel—dead?"

"He is, beyond doubt."

"Then we have reason to rejoice. But wusn't that fire more than you intended?"

"It was more than we bargained for. Bagster found that the Vigilantes were so close upon him that he must burn his shebang to hide his work. But the wind was so strong that it drove the fire down the whole city. All is for the best, after all, I guess, for Bagster made a big thing in buying up the damaged quartz mill."

"Oh 't's an ill wind that blows nobody good, you know."

"I believe it. But come, we have a long ride

before us, and it is time we were moving. Bring out the girl, Sloan, and we'll be off."

"You can go with him, Joe and Devins," said the owner of the sharp voice, who had been called Arnold by his confederate.

"We will bring her out this way," said Sloan as he moved away.

"That stage job to-day was a bad affair, Arnold."

"Worse than that. But, look here, Bill, it ain't best for that gal to see our faces."

"You are right. Let's put on our masks."

The desperadoes had barely adjusted their disguises, when Rock Randel, who had not moved for the past half-hour, suddenly sprung to his feet with the agility of a panther, and bounding before the startled men ere they could comprehend the movement, and leveling a revolver at the face of either, cried:

"Move an inch and you are dead men!"

CHAPTER XV.

EXCITING SCENES.

NEVER were men more completely surprised than the desperadoes confronted so suddenly by Rock Randel.

In a moment it became evident that he had been playing a deep scheme.

Truly what could not the fertile brain of The-Man-from-Texas devise or carry out?

The moment he uttered the words given he succeeded them with a sharp whistle.

"Dog, what does this mean?" gasped Ridley the first to speak.

"That you are a dead man if you move!"

An oath escaped the man's lips.

Granny Sloan started to her feet in unspeakable terror.

All this passed as it were in the flash of a second's time, and then the doors were thrown open, and a trio of armed men bounded into the apartment.

The foremost was the officer of the stage and the others two of his assistants.

"Take 'em!" said Rock coolly, "if ye want the leaders of the Cross-tree road-agents."

"Never!" yelled Ridley fiercely, and, unmindful now of the Texan's firearm he sprung to one side to escape.

His confederate, too, followed his example.

Lively times ensued.

The four found it no easy task to overpower the desperate men brought so fearfully at bay.

In the twinkling of an eye the latter had drawn their weapons, and shot succeeded shot with startling rapidity.

Leaping to and fro to escape the fire of their assailants they tried to gain the door.

Rock saw and understood the move.

At the moment the light was extinguished, and the combatants were left in darkness.

But The-Man-from-Texas had "spotted" his victim.

Ridley was on the threshold when Randel felled him to the floor like a stricken ox.

Arnold had received a bullet-wound which was bleeding profusely, and he was fast losing his strength.

As his confederate fell he, too, was overpowered.

"Have ye got him?" asked Rock.

"Yes."

"Then blaze up that pitch-knot. I want to see how the coyotes look."

A light was quickly procured and brought forward.

"First of all make 'em fast," cautioned the Texan.

"This done—they were still unconscious from the blows they had received—Rock tore the mask from their faces.

"Godd powers!" ejaculated the officer as he saw the features of the larger; "'tis Dan Ridley, mayor of Ridley's Bluff!"

"True as preachin', old beaver."

"But he can't be one of the road-agents! You have made a fearful mistake."

"Not much! Didn't he fought like one on 'em? Let's see how his pard looks."

The other was a stranger to all.

"Whelping hound!" exclaimed The-Man-from-Texas. "I reckon 'twas ye who buried Roland Maxcy alive! Don't talkilate ye'll do it ag'in."

As if aroused by the speech the man began to move and slowly opened his eyes.

"What means this?" he asked hoarsely.

"Reckon ye have played out," declared Rock grimly. "But, boys," turning to his associates, "our fun ain't over. Three of these chaps' pards hev gone for a female they hev got stowed away hyar, and we must look for her."

At this juncture Alf, who had been aroused by the noise of the conflict, appeared upon the scene.

His surprise cannot well be told.

He saw Rock before him, well and active; and of the others?

"Kem, old pard," cried Rock, "don't stand there looking like a turkey peeking in a jug. I hev found yer peppermint! Yer sugar-heart, I mean, and we must resky her from the coyotes."

"Have you found Lilla, Rock? Is she safe?"

"Hark! thar she keens! Hyar, two on ye stand one side the door, and Alf, ye stand on t'other with me. Let the varmints get fairly in the room, and then go for 'em, rough-and-tumble. But, don't hurt the gal. Hist! quick!"

Quickly taking the position assigned them by The-Man-from-Texas, they waited for the appearance of the expected ruffians.

They were not kept in suspense long.

The door was jerked open by the old man Sloan, and his confederates came into the room, dragging Lilla in his arms.

"We had a hard tussle to get the she—"

The sentence was never finished. Before they could understand the danger the three were prisoners.

"Are you hurt, my darling?" asked Alf, as he clasped Lilla in his arms.

"No. But, Alf, I hardly know you in this disguise. How did you come here?"

"I will tell you all by and by. Are you sure you are unhurt?"

"Perfectly. But what won't those dreadful men do next?"

"No more harm, I trust. See, they are prisoners now."

"Wal, I declar', purty one, ye look as sweet as ever. But I'll be ye hev had a tough time. Hev ye been to supper?" asked Rock.

"I have had what will pass for that. But I do not know you, sir."

"Don't know me? Jeems Stoppel! look ag'in. Oh! I 'member now; I have changed some since you see'd me afore. These 're peeping lights make me look like somebody else."

"But, how is it, Rock? I see you alive and well, when you seemed so near gone only a short time ago."

"Ki-yil 'bout gone under, wasn't I?"

"I thought so, truly."

"Old coon, ye must 'scuse me for playin' 'possum on ye. I smelt what war up hyar, from what I hed heerd, and so I trapped to ketch the game. I told the officers what I war goin' to do, and instead of keepin' on to Cross-tree to kem back and be ready to help me out. I thought 'twan't best to get ye inter the muddle, 'cause ye are young and don't know much 'bout war. Won't think hard on me for it, will ye? Remember, in a long run I am your friend to the last."

"You have done nobly, and here is my hand."

"And hyar is mine, old beaver."

While the conversation recorded was taking place, the others were binding their last prisoners.

Granny Sloan had remained in the corner, speechless.

In the midst of the lull in affairs one of the captives suddenly sprung to his feet.

It was Dan Ridley who had undone the bungling knot tied in his ligatures, and he was free! Before any one could stop him he had leaped through the open door and was gone.

"Randel Rock!" cried The-Man-from-Texas, the first to move, "thar goes the coyote!" and he started to follow him, when his goggles fell down on his nose so that it blinded his sight, and he stumbled and came near falling over one of the men.

"Leaping painters! I wish 'em lookers war whar my top-knot is!" and Rock threw the glasses from him excitedly.

Meanwhile the fleeing desperado had gained the open air, and springing upon the back of one of the horses hitched in the yard, was heard to ride madly away.

"Look arter things hyar," exclaimed Rock. "That varmint don't escape ef I have to follow him through the sea o' Californy!" and seizing his rifle from the corner he rushed out of doors, sprung into the saddle of a second horse, and bore downward upon the course of the flying outlaw.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WILD CHASE.

THE clatter of the horses' hoof-strokes soon died away in the distance.

"They have gone on toward Cross-tree, but I

fear Rock won't overtake him," said the officer. "It war a careless job of ours, anyway."

"Who was that man?" asked old Sloan, the only one who had anything like self-possession among the prisoners.

"Rock Randel, The-man-from-Texas."

"Then he has more lives than a painter!"

"Yes; and he ain't afeared to risk any of them. But come, men, we must start on for Cross-tree."

After consultation, however, it was decided to spend the night at the place.

But little sleep visited any there that night.

Granny Sloan, despite her protestations, was put under guard.

Dumb Dick, strange to say, could not be found.

We have made no attempt to portray the happiness of our lovers who were so suddenly and unexpectedly reunited. As yet, they could hardly realize that they were safe. True, there was still a price set on the head of Alf, but he had little to fear from that, now.

In the morning all set out for Cross-tree together, leaving the Wayside Home deserted.

Here permit us to anticipate by saying that the outlawed road-agents who had been captured were summarily dealt with according to border law. Sloan and his wife, however, were permitted to depart in peace with the understanding that they should leave the country, which they were not slow in doing.

Dumb Dick proved to be Arnold, the robber, in disguise.

Reaching Cross-tree and leaving Lilla at her home in safety, Alf joined a party that set out to the aid of Rock.

Meanwhile let us turn to follow the fortunes of the intrepid Texan.

In speed the animals of the fleeing outlaw and his pursuer were about equal.

Riding for life or death the first urged his steed on to its very utmost, while Rock with purpose scarcely less determined, gave him chase.

"Go it, old p'izen-eye!" yelled The-Man-from-Texas, "it's a long trail that ain't got any end."

For the first two miles the distance between them did not seem to vary. Rock was growing nervous, and he began to finger his rifle, resolved to try a shot soon if a change in the race did not occur, when he found that at last he was gaining on the other. Ay, his horse was likely to prove the stronger in a long race.

It soon became apparent that his foe understood this, from the hurried glances that he constantly cast backward.

Still they rushed on till two miles more had been passed, and Rock was now bearing close down upon his victim.

"Hold up!" he cried, "or I'll fire!"

A hoarse laugh was the only reply, and almost the same instant Ridley wheeled his horse sharply to the left and disappeared in the growth.

With a cry of defiance Randel watched for the opening, and as he reached it followed furiously upon the new course of the desperado.

They were now riding along a bridle path that Rock knew led through Cross-tree valley to a mining settlement at the lower extremity of the mountain range. Of course their progress was somewhat slower, though the Texan managed to keep his man in sight the most of the time.

"I don't like this," he exclaimed. "The varmint means mischief in leading me off hyar."

As he gave the thought expression, he struck his horse a smart blow to urge him forward at a quicker pace, when the animal reared and plunging on headlong for a few rods reeled and fell to the earth, where it lay in a quivering heap.

Rock had succeeded in freeing his feet from the stirrups and sprung safely to the ground.

His first thought was to look for his foe, but he had disappeared from view.

It took but a glance to show that his poor horse had done its work.

"'Tis too bad, but I don't see how it can be helped," he ejaculated, as he witnessed the momentary sufferings of the beast that soon lay rigid in death. "The coyote has flung me out, this time, sure. But I must follow on foot."

Without hesitation Rock started on again at his peculiar loping pace, following without difficulty the hoof-prints left by Ridley's horse.

On and on, deeper and deeper into the forest he pursued the trail of his foe.

A mile was gone over when he found that the hoof-marks no longer were seen in the path, but that they had turned aside, taking a course now more directly toward the mountains.

"By the plains o' Texas, I am runnin' the varmint to his den," he muttered.

After this, however, he found the tracks harder to distinguish. The country was becoming more broken, and often for rods at a time he could find no trace of them, until at last he was forced to pause. True, the sky was thickly studded with stars, but it was not daylight.

As Rock glanced about him he saw with a start further up the hillside the fresh mound of earth which marked the grave of the unfortunate Roland Maxey.

"My rifle," he exclaimed, as he gazed upon the fatal spot, "the coyote who helped put you there is corralled. The other, too, shall follow, or Rock Randel passes in his own check. He don't forget his pledge."

While looking to the right and left Rock's sight became fixed upon the rocky gully below.

"Jeems Stoppel! they kem from thet way, and who can tell but they war right from their den? I must explore that place."

Suited action to the thought he cautiously advanced in that direction, while he searched every boulder and thicket with flashing eyes for some indication of a lurking foe.

A hundred rods further down the hollow he was brought to a stand-still by the sound of a human voice, or at least he would have sworn that he heard such.

"It can't be my old ears have fooled me!" he said himself, as he listened in vain to hear it again. "Hist! there it is!"

"Help—help!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A FATAL SHOT.

It was a woman's voice that seemed to come from below him.

After glancing about Rock ran forward for a few rods when he suddenly found himself upon the brink of a cliff with an abyss yawning below of many feet. Barely saving himself from falling off into the depths, he stopped on the very edge.

"Hel—"

"Stop that jade's clatter or I'll knife you!"

As the words fell plainly upon his ears, Rock glanced downward to look upon an exciting scene.

At least thirty feet below him, on the side of the solid ledge was a sort of shelf or passway and on the narrow strip of rock with a chasm below of unknown depth, he saw three men—the foremost, Dan Ridley, with a woman in his arms!

"Why don't Joe come along? It is no time to dally."

"I guess he can't find the powder."

"Strange! Many times as I have told you to be ready to leave at a moment's warning, you ain't ready now?"

"But this is deuced sudden, colonel. What has bu'sted that you come here in this awful excitement, and say we must leave the country at once?"

"The Old Boy is to pay, that's the matter! Arnold is a prisoner! Sloan and the all Wayside have been hauled up. The whole city is turned up, and Bagster's had to get. I barely escaped by the skin of my teeth to be pursued almost to this spot! If we don't get out of this before morning we never shall!"

"Bad's that? But whar are ye going to pitch next?"

"Newry's camp, fifty miles to the south. But why don't that drone come along?"

From his position Rock could obtain only a partial view of the party below, but he dared not move for fear of betraying his presence.

He saw that the path gradually ascended until it reached the top of the cliff a few hundred feet to his right.

While trying to devise some way to rescue the captive, a man came out of an open in the side of the rock behind the outlaws and joined them.

"I can't find it to save my life, and the boys are swearing like blazes 'cause you won't divy the spoils here."

"Curse them!" exclaimed Ridley, excitedly. "I will go back and silence them or break their necks. Here, Dane, hold this woman and see that she don't escape while I am gone."

"Better throw her over the precipice and have done with the bother of her! She has caused us more trouble than all else we have had to deal with."

"Over with her then! If you make a sure thing of her death fifty dollars are yours!" answered the maddened chief, as he turned to enter the cavern.

"Greed!" cried the heartless wretch. "Here goes for her!"

As the monster tried to hurl the poor woman out over the frightful chasm which yawned down till lost in the darkness, she clung to him with frantic desperation.

"Oh, spare me! spare me!"

Seeing that their companion was having his hands full, the other inhuman ruffians sprung to his assistance.

A cry of horror escaped the lips of Rock Randel as he saw the hapless one's peril.

In an instant his rifle was at his shoulder, and glancing along its barrel he took hasty aim at the nearest desperado and fired.

Two death cries blending as one rung out with frightful accents on the night, for the second villain had leaped forward in time to receive the bullet that had passed through the brain of the other.

Then, the stricken twain, reeling backward, went crashing down the declivity into the depths, carrying with them in their death clutch the luckless woman!

"Good God!" cried Randel as he saw the doomed three disappear from sight, "I have done it!" and the strong man inured to dangers and sufferings of every kind, staggered back for the moment, bewildered.

The remaining outlaw glanced around in terror.

Ridley heard the shot, and came rushing back from the cavern in alarm.

Rock quickly recovered himself and turned to leave the spot, when he found himself confronted by three of the most brutal desperadoes he had seen, who had discovered him and were trying to reach him without being heard.

Seeing no way to escape them without a fight, the Texan was not long in emptying the remaining barrel of his rifle, and one of the ruffians fell.

The others, armed with knives, sprung forward with fierce yells.

Casting aside his rifle, Rock drew his revolvers and began discharging them with lightning-like rapidity.

Before the twain could reach him his shots had sent another to the earth. But, undaunted by the fate of his companions, the survivor hurled himself upon the cool marksman.

Receiving the outlaw's attack with a bold front, Rock sent him headlong upon the brink of the canyon.

Though partially stunned, the man, still unconquered, sprung to his feet, and with an oath, again threw himself upon his adversary.

In too close quarters now to use powder and ball, Rock dashed up the intended blow of his combatant with the left arm, and with the other sent him reeling to the earth for the second time.

He was about to spring upon him and thus end the contest, when he received a sharp blow upon the head, which felled him by the side of his foe.

Ridley and others had heard the firing and reached the spot at this juncture.

"Ho!" exclaimed the chief, as his followers overpowered the senseless Texan, "it is the man whom of all others I most desire. I am satisfied now, come what may. Bring him down into the cavern."

Lifting Rock in their arms they bore him down the narrow way and into the somber retreat which the outlaws made their stopping-place. We came near saying *home*, but such men as they know not the meaning of such a blessed word.

The Man-from-Texas came to his consciousness to find himself lying upon the jagged bottom of the cave and a dozen of the coarse-featured desperadoes standing round him.

"At last, Rock Randel, I have triumphed," said Ridley, as he waved a torch over the prisoner's head. "Let me see if you are securely tied, for I don't intend you shall escape, this time."

Then as he examined the captive's bonds he continued:

"Ha, men, bring me that raw hide, and I'll make him a little more secure," when Rock's arms were pinioned behind him in a manner no power of his could loosen. His ankles were also lashed as firmly.

"There," said the outlaw chief, arising to his feet with the smile of a demon, "I'll warrant that. But I would like to see how you look since you came out of that fire. With your permission I will remove these fixings."

Drawing his knife he cut off the wig and false beard Rock was wearing, and nearly severing one-half of his ear in doing it through a carelessness that seemed intentional.

"Pardon me, but I have marred your good looks a little I fear," he said mockingly. "But it will be all the same to you where you are going. Guess I will keep this hair for my use. I think it'll be—"

Thus far Rock had not said a word, but as he felt the blood trickling down his neck and he listened to the taunts of his captors he could stand no more.

Springing half way to his feet in his excitement he cried:

"Coyote, I would give my life for a moment's freedom!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

BACK FROM THE GRAVE.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the outlaw leader, "I have no more to fear from you. Men, bear him back into the rear of the dungeon-cave. We have no more time to fool away here."

Rock was roughly dragged to the extremity of the underground passage.

"There," spoke the chief again, "this place was originally the course of the stream that now flows to the other side of the canyon. We turned the water there so we could have this channel for a place of exit in case our retreat should be discovered and our escape cut off at our usual pass-way. Now we shall leave you here, and as we go away tear down the dam that keeps the torrent back and let it come in upon you. It will be a horrible death for you, but it is the best I choose to do. Come, men, let's away. Farewell, Rock Randel; may you die ~~thus~~."

With the words the speaker turned away followed by his band.

Rock had said nothing, knowing its uselessness.

As the last sound of their footsteps died away a feeling of utter loneliness came over him such as he had never felt. Still he would not yield to despair. Too often had he faced death to act the coward now.

He worked his bonds in vain to accomplish his liberty.

Knowing it was a waste of strength to continue the efforts he sunk back, resolved to meet his end calmly.

Hark! Was that the rush of water?

The outlaw chief had kept his threat!

In a moment the tide began to rush up on every side of him and the place was soon overrun with the water.

Merciful heaven! he was lost now!

Faster and faster, higher and higher swept the angry current!

In a moment Rock felt it cover his body, and though he was holding his head as high as possible it would soon be under the flood!

It laved his mouth!

Another minute and he would be drowned!

Nearly frantic he struggled to arise, but only to fall back in despair.

In his exertions, however, he found that he was near the wall of the cavern. This gave him hope; and by catching the cord around his wrists upon the ragged surface of the rock he succeeded in raising himself to a half upright posture.

It cut and tore his flesh; still his life was at stake and he heeded it not.

In that uncomfortable position he found he could keep his head above the stream. But the agony he endured was beyond description.

Shut up in that horrible place, surrounded by a darkness so intense that he could seem to feel its weight upon his feverish face, expecting every breath to slip into the tide, each moment seemed to him an eternity.

At times he was tempted to let himself down into the flood and thus seek relief in death. Still with that tenacity so peculiar to the human being he clung to life.

Hours dragged themselves away until it truly seemed that years had passed.

It was not until nature was fast yielding to exhaustion and his very moments seemed numbered, that Rock felt the cord upon his wrists slacken.

Joy! Almost before he knew it they were free. The thong upon his feet, too, had so slackened that he quickly freed them.

Weakened, cramped by his long inactivity, while suffering a numbness from lying in the water so long that he could not well shake off, he staggered to his feet.

"Thank God!" was all he could say.

His deliverance which appeared a miracle, was no less or more than the yielding of the

raw hide, with which the outlaws had bound, by saturation in the water.

When at last he had somewhat recovered his strength Rock groped his way out of the dismal place.

Nearly overjoyed, he finally reached open air, to find that it was almost daylight.

"My gracious!" said aloud as he wrung the water from his drenched garments, "that was little the toughest fix I hev been in since I kem to California. But I'm good for another trip. First, I reckon I'll see of that poor female is really gone under, and then I'll strike the trail o' that varmint ag'in. Jeems Stipple! he sha'n't ketch me nappin' this time!"

Following the narrow passway up to the heights above, Rock could see that the river flowed at the base of the cliff.

"I hope she escaped, but I'm mighty afeard she didn't."

As soon as gaining the top of the path he followed along the canyon's brink, hoping to find a place where he could descend to the water.

In this he was disappointed; but he had not got far when he caught sight of a form under the bank.

With bated breath he looked again and saw that it was a woman's figure.

"Hurray!" he cried in joyous excitement, when the person, aroused by the sound of his voice, started up and looked wildly around.

"Hyer I am! Are you damaged much?"

"Oh! I'm nearly killed! Save me! save me!" she implored.

"Hold right on and I'll fish you out."

Going back into the forest Rock soon procured a long slender pole. Then taking off his coarse hunting-frock he tore it into strips of sufficient strength, and secured this hastily improvised line to the end of the stick. This done, he made a slipping-noose in the disengaged end of the cord and let it down to the woman.

"Slip it round your body under your arms, and then I'll fetch you up."

"It required a mighty effort, but he was equal to the task; and a few minutes later she stood beside him.

"Words cannot express the gratitude I feel for deliverance from that fearful place," she murmured, as she sunk upon the ground exhausted by her exertions.

Rock himself but a little stronger could offer her little assistance.

"I don't think we hev any more to fear from the coyotes and a little rest will do us good."

The woman was evidently in middle life, though the cares and sufferings she had experienced made her seem much older.

"How did you 'scape getting stove into sas-sages arter that tumble?" asked Rock.

"I think it must have been owing to the bodies of those men, which broke the force of my fall. I found but little trouble in getting out of the water, but I never expected to get out of that place alive. Kind sir, I owe my life to you, but I cannot find words to express my gratitude."

"I don't want ye to hunt for 'em, not by a long stick. I reckon I hev had quite a tramp to find ye."

"Were you looking for me? Then you had heard of my captivity?"

"I reckon. Ain't you Roland Marcy's wife?"

Starting up in great surprise, she cried:

"Yes! Do you know aught of my husband? Speak! Is he living?"

Bewildered by the speaker's sudden earnestness, Rock could not find his speech to answer at once.

"Tell me," she implored. "Where is he? I know you have met him!"

"I knew him. I—"

"Then he is indeed dead! But there, I have mourned him as such these many years."

"Yes; he's gone under," said Rock, compassionately. "I was with him when he gave up his hand. His funeral is just up hyar a little way."

"His—"

"I mean, his grave is in this valley not a rifle-shot from hyar."

"Where?" she asked, excitedly. "Can it be he was so near?"

"Jesus. Foiler me, and I'll show you the place."

She followed him in silence, too full for utterance.

A few minutes' walk brought them in sight of the lonely grave.

"Thar!" said Rock, simply, as he pointed to the newly-made mound of earth.

"Oh, my husband! my dear dear husband!"

she cried, as she rushed toward the sacred spot.

Before she reached it, however, a wilder cry escaped her lips.

Lying near the grave was a human form, that started slightly up at the sound of her voice.

Pausing one moment spellbound, the next she threw herself by the side of the prostrate one, exclaiming:

"Oh, Roland! Roland! can this be possible?"

Rock saw in speechless amazement that Roland Maxcy was indeed living and lay before him.

"Mary, my wife!" was all the overjoyed husband could say as he folded her in his arms.

Long and tenderly the two remained locked in each other's embrace, their happiness too great for words to express. After eighteen years of separation, through the negligence of a benign Providence, the husband and wife had been reunited.

Rock, more used to scenes of hardship, danger and suffering, turned aside to brush a tear from his eyes.

When the first transport of their joy had passed, the happy couple turned their minds to the affairs of the moment.

Roland Maxcy, still suffering from the wound received at the hands of his foe, Hiram Lore, or Daniel Ridley, as the arch-villain called himself, was very feeble. In fact, his situation was very precarious.

Instead of having been buried alive, as Rock had supposed, the first shovelful of dirt thrown upon him by the outlaws had so far revived him that he understood his peril enough to crawl away from the spot into the neighboring bushes while the desperadoes were having their encounter with the bear.

In their hurry after their fight with bruin the outlaws filled up the grave without missing Maxcy.

Still he seemed little better off. Too weak to get away from the spot for any distance, he had been forced to remain in the vicinity. He had somewhat appeased his hunger and thirst by eating portions of the bear left by the robbers. We will spare the reader the agony and suspense he must have endured.

"Jeems Stopple!" exclaimed Rock, "this am the queerest trail I ever set my peeping lights on. Howsumever, it'll come out slick as thirteen rows of live oaks. I hev corralled the black-faced chap as wanted to dig your funeral, and I have spotted t'other."

"Between talks" Rock made what preparations he could for the wounded man's comfort.

"I reckon we are three sorry-looking beavers, and I'll be skulped alive ag'in if I know how we are going to get down to Cross-tree."

Again fortune favored them.

The sun was little more than an hour's time above the horizon, when they saw a party of horsemen approaching, the foremost of whom Rock quickly recognized as Alf Howe.

Alf and his companions, who had come to find Rock and assist him in the capture of the outlaws, were surprised to meet the friends the Texan had found.

After much talking it was decided to start at once for Cross-tree, which we are glad to say they reached without further adventure.

It was a tedious journey to Roland Maxcy, but his wounds were not dangerous, and once he had reached a place where comfort and care could be given him, a speedy recovery was looked forward to.

Rock's first move was to attire himself in a new suit of "toggery." This done, he shouldered his rifle, saying:

"Wal, friends, I reckon this coon is off like a split stick. He's goin' to strike the trail o' that coyote, and he don't let it git cold till thar's powder burnt. He smells fun, wagh!"

"Let him go, Rock," said Alf as he held the Texan's hand. "The guilty can't escape punishment."

"Rock Randel don't intend they shall. So, Alf, my beaver, I'm off. Ef the varmint don't ring me out I'll kem round and see you and the gal some time. Roland Maxcy, I hope ye'll git round slick. Git'n us your paw, for I'm on a powerful dig to git off. I can't no more rest than a hickory sprout in a norther till I have kept my pledge."

In spite of the request of his friends to remain with them and let the arch-demon, Hiram Lore, be left to meet his inevitable doom sooner or later from a just God, Rock mounted his horse, and turning his face toward Newry's Camp, started once more on the trail of death.

CHAPTER XIX.

HUNTED DOWN.

Six months later.

Around the bar of a mining camp in Swift River Valley a score or more of roughly clad miners and loafers were startled from their drinking and story-telling by the sudden appearance of a haggard-looking, wild-eyed stranger among them.

Clothed in rags, with a woe-begone expression upon his emaciated face, he flung himself upon the nearest dry-goods box, crying:

"For mercy's sake, save me!"

"What's up?" asked one of the surprised crowd.

"I am hunted like a dog!"

"The man is mad!" exclaimed a bystander.

"Oh, my God! I shall go mad. Pity me! Let me hide somewhere till he is gone!"

"Who?" asked the amazed miners. "As long as you carry a civil tongue you are safe here."

"Not that! I am tracked! A man is hunting me to death!"

"Sho! And ye look as if he hed driven ye most there! But tell us what you want, and we are ready to help you."

Encouraged by the promise the new-comer started up.

"Thank you," he cried. "Aid me and I will never forget your kindness. Secrete me so he be cannot find me."

Puzzled beyond expression the spectators stared upon him in silence.

"Quick!" cried the man. "He will find me and then I am a dead sinner!"

"Who is hunting you? Explain yourself if you wish us to help you."

"I am followed by the spirit of a man who died in Cross-tree Hollow six months ago. He has tracked me like a blood-hound!"

"A dead man hunting him? Ha-ha! he must be crazy!"

"No-no! Let me—"

Suddenly a dark form appeared in the doorway, and a laugh broke in upon the speaker's words.

Turning quickly about he uttered a cry of terror and reeling forward, groaned:

"It is he! I am lost!"

The individual who had so abruptly made his appearance was a tall strongly built person with a dark, sun-burned face, raven hair, and a full beard.

"Randel Rock!" he exclaimed, "at last, co-yote, I hev hunted ye down!"

"Rock Randel, 'The-Man-from-Texas'" chattered the bystanders.

It was our hero, but greatly altered from what we remember him when in Cross-tree. Six months had healed the wounds he had received there, and given him a growth of luxuriant hair. Instead of a mustache now he wore a full beard which made him look much older.

"Varmint," he said, sternly, facing the towering wretch who was none other than the sometime mayor of Ridley's Bluff, and also leader of the road-agents in conjunction with Black Arnold, "I hev follied yer trail from Cross-tree to Newry's Camp, from there to White Springs, and then to Lost Lead Mine, from whar ye hev kem to this place. Ef ye are not a sneaking coyote ye'll meet me like a man. One o' us must go under!"

"Is that you, Rock Randel, or your spirit?"

"Both, old chap, es true es I hail from old Texas. Kem, I am onpatient to try my shooter."

"I have no quarrel with you, " plead the trembling villain. "Why do you persecute me in this manner?"

"No quarrel with me!" repeated Rock, as he fixed his piercing gaze upon the other. "D'y'e think I have forgotten the night you left me in that cave to go to my funeral in three feet of water tied hands and feet? D'y'e think I shall ever lose the scar your knife left upon me? Mary a chip, old coyote. I swore to Roland Maxcy when ye had left him for a dead beaver, es ye thought, that I would hunt ye till one of us went under. I want to tell you that Roland Maxcy and his wife are both above the sod and as bright as chippin' birds in the spring. I'm round, too, as lively as a tumblebug in a shower."

"Is Roland Maxcy living?" asked the outlaw, in amazement. "And his wife, too?"

"Sartin sure, es true es 'possum shininn' an aligator in the dark."

"Let me go in peace and I will swear to never molest you or them again."

"Never! All I ask is fair play. Meet me

like a man, and the best shot wins. Ef I fail, it will be all right, only see that my body is covered out of sight. Ef 'tis you to turn up yer toes, I'll see ye are well earthed. Can ye ask for more?"

"It's square!" cried the crowd. "Stand up, stranger, and fight the Texan as a man."

"I'll bet fifty on the long-haired chap!" declared one of the miners, but no one took up the wager, and in silence the crowd followed the duelists out of the building.

Pale and trembling Hiram Lore took the position assigned him.

Rock did the same and the two stood ready for the signal to turn and fire.

Ready! Ere the warning numbers were counted which were to precede the fatal word, "fire," the outlaw wheeled and with a hasty aim fired thinking to dispose of his foe and then escape the crowd.

Fatal move.

Nervous and excited his bullet flew wide of its mark.

The-Man-from-Texas, firm and cool as ever, turned and slowly leveled his never-failing weapon.

A sharp spang, succeeded by a piercing cry, and the cowardly wretch fell to earth to rise no more.

Rock had fulfilled his mission.

CHAPTER XX.

EXPLANATORY.

A year has passed since the eventful night of the burning of Ridley's Bluff.

No one who saw the city then in flames would realize that within twelve months' time there would be no vestige of the fire, and that double the buildings would now mark the spot.

Such is the case.

Business flourishes and there is naught on the horizon of the future to destroy its prosperity.

Dan Sanford is now its mayor, fulfilling his duties with credit to himself and satisfaction to others.

With the destruction of the road-agents as we have told, no others have arisen to break the peace of the country.

It is to the home of Roland Maxcy and his wife, who have settled down to a quiet life in Ranelville, as the place once known as Ridley's Bluff is now called out of respect to our Texan hero, that we would have the reader accompany us.

They have both recovered from the effects of the suffering they had felt, and are extremely happy, immeasurably so, inasmuch as in the fair Lilla they have found their long-lost daughter.

She gladly accepted their proof of relationship, for Lemuel Divons had proved a stern and unloving master to her.

It seemed when Roland Maxcy was away from home, Hiram Lore had gone to his wife and told her that he (Maxcy) was sick in a distant city.

She had not heard from him for a long time, and not knowing Lore's true character she accepted his story in good faith, and with her kind went to see her husband.

Unable to find him at the designated place, she was about to return, when the arch-plotter again met her and told her that Roland had given out a false report in regard to being sick, but had really gone to California, with no intentions of ever returning to her.

Of course she could not believe the story, though Lore brought forward men who corroborated what he had said.

Mrs. Maxcy went back to her home, nearly broken-hearted, and wholly unable to find any trace of her husband, until she saw a California paper one day, speaking of a Roland Maxcy doing business in one of the mining settlements.

Convinced now of Lore's truthfulness, and having friends there Mrs. Maxcy resolved to go to California, and with her young daughter reached the place to find her relatives either dead or moved away.

Again as if by some strange fatality, though really through his own machinations to avenge himself upon her for rejecting his hand in marriage, she met Hiram Lore.

He knew, or at least pretended, to know nothing of her husband.

From that day her troubles increased. Her child was lost, and supposed to have been killed.

Her grief knew no bounds. Without the means to return to her home, and no friend to send to, she remained in that place.

Lore asked her to marry him, and after repeating his offer without success he finally swore she should never know another moment's peace.

He caused her to be carried off by the gang of outlaws of whom he was the unknown leader, and she never knew an instant's relief until through the work of Rock Randel she was again with her husband.

He had after leaving his home, been imprisoned for a crime of which he was innocent, and in a foreign land had been unable to send word to his friends; and thus when he at last returned his sorrow can be well imagined to find his wife missing. He followed her to California, but not to learn aught of her until the day our story opened he had seen Hiram Lore, and fallen by his hand.

At last the happiness which had been so long denied them was granted, and in their great joy the past was temporarily forgotten.

"We need only one more to gladden us with his presence," said Lilla, on the evening of which we speak, as in company with her husband, happy Alf Howe, she was visiting her parents.

"And he is Rock Randel," replied her father. "We have not heard a word from him for a year.

"I reckon. Thought he would come to speak for himself straight as a row o' thirteen live oaks!" cried a cheery voice in the doorway, and turning they beheld their noble friend.

With one accord the four gathered around with anxious questions in regard to his welfare.

"Glad to see ye all. Heerd 'bout your streaks of good luck, and jess thought I would trot 'round and set my peeping sights on you. I am as slick as a spruce tree, and twice as spry as a yaller jacket. I'm on my way to join an old pard who has got into some tall doin's up north."

"As uneasy as ever, my good fellow. But you must stop with us awhile. We have much to ask you, though first of all, we wish to know what has become of him whom you went in pursuit of?"

His simple reply was:
"Rock Randel has kept his pledge."

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